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Reading Keats Today:
Bi-Centenary Essays on John Keats

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Bi-Centenary Essays on John Keats

Edited by

Surabhi Banerjee

Professor and Head of the Department of English,
Calcutta University

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Introduction

The Achievement of Keats in India(1795-1995)

' I am surprised at the extent of dedication and high seriousness to which Keats is cherished and read by scholars and readers in India '— that is how Jonathan Cook summed up his ' unexpected discovery of an active Keats culture' in this country. He made this remark at the terminal session on Keats at Calcutta University; he was slowly sifting and winnowing his gleanings of Keats vis-a-vis Indian Universities. Jonathan Cook, an eminent British scholar in romantic literature and critical theories, was here as a Visiting Lecturer, scheduled to span an enormous topos in the course of three fleeting weeks. On the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Keats, Dr. Cook was formally honoured by the British Council, with the task of taking Keats to Indian academies across the country. With Keats, Cook travelled to Delhi, to the University of Pune, to Elfinstone College in Bombay and to theUniversity of Gujarat in Ahmedabad.He flew to the University of Kurukshetra to Osmania in Hyderabad and to Thiruvararthapuram. Calcutta was the last slab in the programme.

At Calcutta University Dr. Cook delivered a series of three lectures on 'Keats and the Achievement of Poetry'.It is an Endowment Lecture dedicated to the memory of Professor Mohini Mohon Bhattacharya, a foremost scholar of English literature. The earlier incumbents of this lecture include scholars and creative writers such as Professor A.G.Stock, Professor John Carey, Professor Douglas Gray and Sir Stephen Spender. 1995 marks the two hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth. So nothing could have been more apt than Keats on this occasion.

It is an event to reaffirm an allegiance to Keats and the greatness of his poetry. For Jonathen Cook it is worth remembering Keats as a figure whose work still talks to us. He strives to convince his listeners that Keats is not a cold movement. In the process he strives to explore the various moods and meanings, often paradoxical, of an idea of achievement in his work.

He begins by exploring the recurrent motif of death, finitude and mortality in Keats's poetry and demonstrates how his early death gives us one meaning of the achievement of poetry. That is poetry which is achieved at the expense of life. Besides isn't our remembrance of Keats life dominantly overshadowed by the signs of his death rather than his birth? The myth of Keats as much as the myth of Romantic poetry grows out of his premature death which eventually acquires a subtle shade of martyrdom. Keats stands to us as a perpetual paradigm of ' the youthful poet ' whose very youthfulness is reinforced by his early death. But this perspective of ' death ' in appraising Keat's achievements as a poet has its inevitable perils and some other familiar details of his ' life ' instead of ' death ', may be worth rehearsing in the context. It would be worthwhile to note that Keats was a social interloper in the literary culture of his period. His comparatively humble birth, his apprenticeship as a doctor and surgeon, his

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self-education in French and Latin, his reading of the Greek classics in translation -- all distinguish him from other romantics, from Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and Shelly. His medical training in particular, was formative for his identity as a poet and for his achievement of poetry. As a matter of fact, this has been one of the focal points in recent Keats criticism in England. His experience as a trainee apothecary, as a surgical dresser consciously or unconsciously entered into his poetry. Medicine also brought him into a special kind of intimacy with the body -- observes Dr. Cook who also cites Christopher Ricks's fine study of the frequency and significance of blushing in Keats; in this connexion Dr. Cook offers the same gloss on Keats's alertness to pallor and the loss of blood to the face or body (La Belle Dame sans merci, Isabella). He further illustrates how this trope is elaborated medicinally which also confirms how close for Keats emotional and physical states were. Given Keats's medical training and the long hours he spent caring for his brother Tom who died of tuberculosis in December 1815, the motif of watching or watching over a lover acquires new meaning beyond eroticism.

These facts Cook thinks, are helpful in a number of ways for an understanding of Keats's achievement. Notably, Keats moved, with an amazing rapidity from apprenticeship to mastery, during the concentrated phase between 1816 and 1819. But he was rejected by his contemporaries as "shabby geneteel" as "vulgar" and as 'effeminate', soft and fleshy, without bone and muscle. His poetry came to be associated with 'sickness', a diseased state of feeling and 'emasculated prurieency : flashy, flamboyant and sensual. In sum, certainly not an achieved poet. This has been a major critical focus on Keats over the last few years. This preoccupation with the Keatsian gender with his being sexually neuter, goes back to the allegation of effeminacy against his poetry. Here was a poet mostly read by women, described by Marilyn Bulter in a radioprogramme as a 'honorary woman'.

Recent criticism also views Keats as an anxious social aspirer. Keats inhabited a radical political culture in which criticism of the monarchy and the church were not incompatible with a strong sense of English patriotism. This gives an insight into Keats's relation to tradition. This interest in political Keats gives substance to the idea of Keats as an interloper.

One may, on the two hundredth anniversary of Keats's birth want to say that the hostile critics of Keats simply got it wrong. One may even console oneself with the Gadamerian thought that's Keats's poetry fits exactly the concept of a hermentic tradition which unfolds the meaning of a work over successive generations, but Jonathan Cook would rather keep this consolation at a distance. He wants to place this question of the achievement of Keats's poetry in the paradox that is created by placing the modern affirmation of his work as a defining example of the achievement of poetic maturity against its contemporary negation as the very evidence of the unachieved.

Dr. Cook further examines Keats's poems and letters as' sensation machines' as he would put it in a more rebarbitative way and in the process, raises quite a

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number of crucial questions. The questions of the neophyte poet and his sacrifice. Keat's ambivalences towards tradition and the Keatsian paradox of sensation.

What struck Cook most in 'his Indian experience with Keats' was the spirit of unmitigated acceptance of the poet in the Indian academia. 'I hadn't known that he has been a very absorbable poet in India'. In his homeland' Keats continues to enjoy a great deal of affection and admiration, says Cook, from the common readers. He has become a part of the English iconography, he figures in the Romantic curriculum but he is still not a compulsory poet and remains overshadowed by Blake, Wordsworth and Shakespeare. The renewed attention he is receiving this year for the bi-centenary, is by no means an infallible yardstick for gauging his 'achievements' in his own country. This volume grew out of the papers presented by eminent scholars at a three-day National Seminar on John Keats held at the Department of English, early this year to commemorate the two hundredth birth-anniversary of the poet.

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Rich to Die : Keats, Imagination and Death

Arup Rudra

As an epigraph to his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* Albert Camus quotes Pindar (Pythian III), 'O my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible'.[1] Keats knew that immortal life was impossible and the limits of the possible were also limited for him. Camus' solution for the absurdity of life was suicide. He observes, in the second sentence of the book, 'Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental questions of philosophy'.[2] Reverting to the first sentence we find Camus stating, 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide'.[3] Keats although continually gnawed by the fear of 'death' wrote to Bailey,

'yet I am not old enough or magnanimous enough to annihilate self.'[4]

It is here that Keats is so different from Camus, or we may say a philosopher like Heidegger to whom death was the only certainty and an end in itself. To a Romantic like Keats, death as an end was inconceivable, because the Romantic vision necessarily entails quest. Keats could only think of death in special ways, not as an end but an extension. With this may be associated another central aspect of Keats, his immense love of life, a desperate attempt to cling to life which he knew was slipping by. I have mentioned 'ways' with a particular design, to indicate briefly how in different poems he was expressing differing responses to 'death' trying to grope towards a great life, a broader horizon or creating a condition where death becomes crystallizations of all the values he cherished in life. To Keats, the flat face of death as an actuality was too much to accept. To use his own words which he put in the mouth of *Ludolph* in *Otho the Great.*

'A bitter death - a suffocating death,—
A gnawing - sillent - deadly, quiet death'.[5]

Keats, however, refused to accept this 'suffocating death', because like all the essential Romantics what mattered to him was the celebration of life which was perpetually denied to him. He was lacerated by this bitter dichotomy of existence as was Yeats much later on. We could relate this to the cultivation of individualism so central to the Romantic tradition. I am drawing your attention to this aspect by way of a relevant digression. I am referring to 'On Individuality and social forms' by George Simmel. Simmel observes,

"Romanticism was perhaps the broadest channel through which the new individualism penetrated the consciousness of the nineteenth century. Goethe created its artistic, Schleiermacher its metaphysical basis, Romanticism created for it a basis in feeling, in experience.

The life of the Romantic translates the synchronic opposition of a social scene in which each individual finds the meaning of his life in his difference

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from all others, in the personal uniqueness of his nature and his activities into a protean succession of contrasting moods and tasks, beliefs and feelings'.[6]

Let us take our cue from this 'protean succession of contrasting moods and tasks, beliefs and feelings'. Let us note how Keats went on weaving patterns of life and death in an intricate web in his short 'actual' life.

I am asking you to give a fresh thought to 'Ode to a Nightingale' from the point of view of Keats's imagination negotiating between life and death. In this poem Keats's imagination created temporary release from the pain of excruciating existential hazards and sought refuge in the illusion of a marvellous stasis. The movement in the poem is from the aching heart to 'no pain'. It is actual life which is generating the 'aches'. It is not simply a question of his 'aches', it is a question of the aches of the actual world, so acutely summed up in the third stanza of the poem.

'The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;'[7]

We might add that only a man who had felt immense pain, mighty aches could use such an expression. What is of importance is to note that the 'imagination' of Keats has created an atmosphere away from the world where palsy shakes a few, sad, last, gray hairs. The perpetual effort of a Romantic is to 'e'chapper a l'influence de cette atmosphere antipathique'[8] [9][to escape this hostile atmosphere], as Baudelaire says. Since I have referred to Baudelaire, I shall use part of a sentence from Baudelaire's essay on Poe to consider Keats as 'd'un de ces illustres malhevreux, trop rich de poe'sie et de passion, qui est venu, apres taut d'autres, faire en ce bas moude le rude apprentissage du genie...'[9]

[as one of those illustrious unfortunate, too rich with poetry and passion who came after so many others to make in this world rude apprenticeship of the genius.]

Keats tries frantically to liberate himself from this 'atmosphere antipathique' through his imagination. His imagination refuses to die here where men sit and hear each other groan. His imagination creates its world to die in 'embalmed darkness' (which has the suggestion of a mummy, kept in scented darkness). Let us note Keats's imagination creates verdurous glooms and mossy ways activated by the song of the nightingale which closes his physical sight to open his 'visionary' senses or the imaginative eye. It is in this light that we should read,

'I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows

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The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine,
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves'.[10]

We might note as well that the flowers and the boughs and everything were in his 'memory' now brought magically into an imaginative context. What I want to emphasize is the relation between the senses, memory and imagination which has a long and interesting history. I am going to use one example of thoughts on the subject which I found in *The Art of Memory* by Frances A. Yates. I am referring to Robert Fludd's monumental work *Utriusque Cosmi Maloris Sciilicet et Minoris, Metaphysics, Physica atque Technica Historia* (1617). Yates in his book, while explaining Fludd's memory-system comments,

'The chapter on "the science of spiritual memorising which is spiritual memorising which is vulgarly called *Ars Memorial*"is introduced by a picture illustrating this science, we see a man with a large 'eye of imagination' in the fore part of his head, and beside him five memory loci containing memory images'.[12] For our purposes we could relate the five 'memory loci' with the five senses and further extend that to the mixture of the senses in producing synesthetic images which become so characteristic of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry. I quoting Yates again for explicating this interesting point.

'One of Fludd's illustrations expresses in visual form the reflection of the three worlds within the mind and memory of the microcosm, He shows a man who is first taking in sense impressions from the sensible world or *munds sensibilis* through his five senses. Next he is dealing with these within as images or "umbra" in a *mundus imaginabilis*.

...The microcosm at this stage is unifying the contents of memory on the celestial level. Finally the diagram comes to the seat of memory, at the back of the head, which receives all three worlds into itself'[13]

The movement here is from the 'senses' to the 'images' to 'memory' which is Fludd's main concern. Where Fludd ends with memory, a Romantic begins with memory (or rather the memory of the sensory perceptions) to images (visual, auditory, tactile etc) to imagination. This is exactly what is happening when Keats says,

'I cannot see what flowers are at my feet etc'.

He cannot 'see' in the sense that he is not seeing with his physical sight, guessing with his imaginative eye. Keats' imagination, in fact, is creating with the help of the memory of the sense impressions a marvellous atmosphere for dying. It is in this context that we may realize the significance of,

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'Darkling I listen; for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath,
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,'[14]

This is the 'painless' stasis that the poet seeks. It is rich to die because it is the moment of crystallizations of all the treasures of life presented in a bouquet by his imagination. However, precisely at this stage the existential paradox shakes him to the roots. He becomes aware that death or atrophy of the sense would mean the annihilation of the senses and the death of imagination also.

'Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain -
To thy high requiem become a sod,'[15]

By taking our cue from the 'protean succession of contrasting moods... beleifs and feelings', I am switching over now to Keats's romantic belief that 'death' is a gateway to another life. I shall ask you to consider his poem 'On Death' (Autumn, 1814). The question that Keats puts is,

'Can death be sleep, when life is but a dream
And scenes of bliss pass as a phantom by ?
The transient pleasures as a vision seem,
And yet we think the greatest pain's to die.
How strange it is that man on earth should roam,
And lead a life of woe, but not forsake
His rugged path; nor dare he view alone
His future doom which is but to awake'.[16]

As a boy of nineteen he refuses to see death as sleep. Perhaps, death is an awakening into a greater life, into a mysterious hour of self-realization through the dream' which is life, which itself is a manifestation of a different kind of sleep. Death appears to him as a sort of transition from one state to another state. The significant word is the last word of the poem 'awake'. Keats is suggesting the idea of awakening into a state of 'life' through death. It is the same idea which we find again in *Hyperion* when Apollo is dying (or being born into a new life). This is how Keats puts it.

'Most like the struggle at the gate of death;
Or liker still to one who should take leave
Of pale immortal death, and with a pang
As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convolse
Die into life :'[17]

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Keats's vision stopped here. He could not think of proceeding any further and the poem breaks off. Even the revised version of *Hyperion* does not lead into any concrete vision of death's other kingdom. It is here that I should like to bring in Yeats' vision of the other world as we find it concretized in *Byzantium* where 'the fury and the mire of human veiras'[18] is purged by 'Dying into a dance',[19] to reach the world of the 'superhuman'[20] who possess true being (Yeats; belief was that true being is possessed only by the dead) because they belong to the world of the 'life' beyond 'death'. When Yeats wrote *Byzantium*, he was sixty five years old and a little before 1930 had nearly died. He had a glimpse of the other world which must have helped him to present symbolically the possible shape of life after the 'mortal' end. The structure of transformation from the world of 'dying generations' [21] to the 'glory of changeless metal'[22] through the breakdown of 'bitter furies of complexity' [23] is something to marvel at. The breathtaking maturity of this 'vision' may be looked at closely, particularly because, I believe, Keats' had a similar possibility, but dying early was unable to give a concrete shape to it. Keats suggested the' struggle at the gate of death', Yeats takes us through the struggle, the 'agony' to a strange world of 'simplicity' with a set of concatenating symbolic images. To Keats, 'actual' or physical death, appears to be 'pale immortal death', a kind of icy fixity, transfixed horror. To a young man suffering from consumption and lacking proper food this image of horror was inevitably dictated by his entire physiological system. His image of entry into the 'other' world is one of convulsion, a spasm. Yeats, with a kind of mature detachment (but aware at the same time of the agonised process of transformation imagines the entry as a 'dance'. Moreover, it is not a matter of convulsion, but of a 'trance', a 'magic' moment - to use Keats's line from his poem 'A prophecy'[24] 'Tis the witching hour of night...'[24] when the great 'cathedral song' sounds symbolically cutting off the 'unpurged images of day' (what Bakhtin, perhaps, would call the carnival of life). It is against this that the transformed 'images' people Yeats' Byzantium, dominated by the dome disdaining 'unpurged images' which stand for 'mere complexities". In Yeats' poem two sets of 'images' confront each other, much like what happens in Cocteau's film on Orpheus (which is a dialogue between the world of the dead and the living. In *Byzantium* the dialogue is similar - between the world of generation, of 'complexity' and the world of 'simplicity', symmetry. In Yeats, the fascinating vision of 'Byzantium', of death's dream Kingdom is a world of dome of golden birds, of golden boughs, of dancing floor peopled with 'images' born out of 'images' which are also 'flames' born out of 'flames'. Through Yeats' vision we move into the world of death which has a 'life' of its own. This is 'life-in-death' for Yeats. Yeats' vision makes it possible for him to die into a new life. The 'unpurged images' sail into their nest, where the 'savage indignation' (Yeats)[25] of life cannot lacerate their hearts. Keats intuited a world after death, but did not live long to structure his vision. It is astounding how early Keats realized what yeats completed in late life. I would not argue that he anticipated Yeats, but we can measure his potential with reference to Yeats.

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This is an occasion for us to stretch our hands, giving at least part of our blood to Keats, wishing he were alive again to complete his vision, because his pathetic cry expressing the desire for living was not only addressed to Fanny Brawne, but to all those who love poetry and life when he wrote,

This living hand, now warm and capable of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold. And in the icy silence of the tomb

So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd - see here it is —[26]
I hold it towards you.

Notes and References

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26. *Op. cit.*, p. 417

[In preparing this paper I have benefitted from discussions with my friend Asst. Professor of English, Hoogly Mohsin College, my student and colleague, Subir Kumar Dhar, Senior Lecturer in English, Rabindra Bharati University, and Upamanuyn Mukherjee, student of P.G II English class, Jadavpur University]

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The Eagle's Watch and the Social Smile : Interchange Of Opposites In Keats's Poetics

K. N. Phukan

I

To be, more than anything else, a poet, was the strong drive and the fine but stern destiny of John Keats. By a singular force of free will and self-education, Keats wished to be, not just another poet to the world and to himself, but a poet, earning by strong yet graceful toil, an *inward* and *outward* completeness of being and becoming. To this end, which he clearly conceived pretty early in his life, he always had much to teach himself, much to strive against and much to unlearn from time to time. The external and internal odds against Keats's inmost drive and unsteady destiny had throughout his short life been large, and often crazy and unnerving. Several accidents of birth, upbringing and education or its absence appear to have, first, concealed, even from himself, his genuine and instinctively boisterous creative energies, and then to have impeded the ripening of his bountiful gifts. The intimations of an active and unifying imagination, and the insistent urge for severe and creative workmanship may in Keats have suffered some initial impairment also from the excesses of his own unformed and unknowing energies. At any rate, they began to stir his consciousness rather late, partly because of the early distractions of a rather irrelevant professional training that was particularly unfit to bring off the poetic talents of a bright and overstrung nineteenth-century adolescent; and was very likely even to cause their utter loss by desiccation from an inimical profession. That Keats had set himself to translate Virgil to English prose, when at school, may have been his earliest free-willed preparatory action in the wake of receiving his first vague intimations of a strong, though as yet only subterranean, poetic impulse. But precisely about that time, Keats was warded off, from helpful and stimulating attention to his strong inner drive and his true creative powers, to train to be a surgeon. Thus, perhaps for his own good, he was to learn to be a poet in a singularly hard way, even though he was greatly gifted. When finally the sure knowledge of his creative powers for poetry and his acute consciousness of inner and outer obstacles to overcome came to be braced in his mind, the increasingly clearer perceptions of the odds and of his early errors endowed him with a great and firmly resisting reserve of energy. On this reserve, this power for resisting the inimical, he applied himself to build his own enabling image of a poetic self and a fund of insights for his poetics and poetry. This he did by a deep and thoroughgoing commitment to continuing self-education as a poet. Firm in his drive to overcome initial disadvantages and early unsureness, Keats had his imagination continually impelled to meditate on poetry, and actually write much *poetry about poetry*. These meditations in Keats's poetry issue forth as more or less the same ideas and insights as those to be found in the poetics that can be constructed out of his *Letters* and other assorted prose. Indeed, the poetic meditations and prose thoughts of Keats regarding the origins, the nature and the effects of poetry are a measure of the unity and the enabling clarity and

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conviction that he continued to *earn* from his severe and endless self-education, until consumption and infatuation got together and broke him.

To single out the more significant poetic musings of Keats on poetry and to see here and there how the insights in them are corroborated by some of the ponderings on poetry in his prose, are the two simple aims in this essay. Underneath these two aims, there is a third; -a wish to recreate an intimate sense, as far as possible, of a unique and sensitive mind active in discovering itself in and about poetry.

II

To ensure economy in quotation and in analytical comments, some of the functional ideas in Keats's *poetry about poetry* may be briefly recounted here. The general movement of Keats's somewhat antithetical ideas about poetry appears to be in the direction of a dialectical interfusion to the point of making them flexible and workable by intermingling their basic components. The ideas naturally arose in his mind as he was engaged, on the one hand, in working himself to the tradition or the heritage of English poetry; and on the other, in trying to ease the way to his own maturing idiom. The insights gained in this process have an air of coming in flashes, with their characteristic unexpectedness becoming a part of their value. In quality and in placement, they look firm but unpremeditated; they indeed are fascinatingly sudden, shooting and isolated; and yet, whether bearing upon the substance and skill of poetry or on the effects of responding to it, they are weighted by an awareness of the intricate relatedness of the issues. Not that there is any astounding originality, for the old yet ever new questions about poetry can only be *rethought* even in the most original mind; but to his mode of rethinking Keats brought a spirit of self-educative combativeness and a charming freshness of application in depth.

In the search for his own mature poetics, Keats, to be sure, was embattled against the excesses and the initially intractable haphazards of his own unformed instincts and also against other odds that were external. The enemies within were undoubtedly the more hostile; the more difficult to curb, if not crush; for there was the danger that too much of weeding out could do damage to the indispensable and instinctive energies. Overzealous, overstrung and overlanguaged, Keats had to tame his instinctive energies into a fine coalescence with moral or interpretative energy by bringing a stream of intuitive if not strictly philosophic thought to bear upon them, and also achieve a severity of workmanship without in any way damaging or drying up the instincts themselves. No reader can be insensitive to the fact that Keats in his early poetry tended more often than not to make his objects and figures very shadowy, for he failed to give them a sharp, distinctive outline, thereby losing the grip on the reader's recreative imagination. What therefore he needed most was a finer spell of words, words with greater graphic power, free from adjectival excess and the artificial inflationary weight of Spencerisms and their likes. The worst fixations that he had to get out of were related to the ornate and to the verbal decadence of

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enchantment, in short, to a recondite *poeticality*. With an imagination straying too often and too much to bygones and to the effervescent, Keats in the beginning could not bring to his poetry even anything like a romantic realism, let alone the weighty wholesomeness of a workaday self–which may be the name for the source of what constitutes for many the supreme and the most original strand in the complex organisms of Shakespeare's poetry. There was in Keats almost a total absence in the beginning of resistance to the vices of what could, when curbed by intermingling, be his virtues or the sources of his greatest creative strength. The trouble with any young poet is that his own virtues can often appear as vices of style and substance in the early poetry. What the early Keats needed most was an imagination that could restrain its heady flight, forget the marvellous to work upon the mundane–an imagination that could be innately interpretative of realities, external and inward, by its wise power of creatively discriminating among the values of life and art in the very act of poetic composition. In short, he needed to educate his powerful imagination so that it could function, not with the consciousness of being impeded, but assured of its fullest freedom, even when restrained by a stream of intuitive thought or by a fusion of intellect and feelings, thus enabling it to partake of the many-sidedness of the human mind. Keats, severely self-taught in this way, was also developing fast to find a rhythm of imagination which could be impelled by an active and unifying purposiveness ever capable of warding off mere moralistic platitudes. Keats was, in short, moving steadily into a creative rhythm that could erase all excrescence in the act of creation, and could generate, as it were, its own *mechanics* for structuring the poetic utterance. The mode of poetic speech that Keats was fashioning was one that could dialectically mediate between opposites such as sensation and thought, the positive and the negative capabilities, the accidental and the essential, the mundane and the marvellous, the joyful and the mournful and so on. Keats was in the process of perfecting his mind to be a resort, where opposites could interchange without an overbalance, and which could achieve an integrity of its resources, while remaining perfectly able to shift without disjunction from one resource to another. In poetry, the shifting from the poetic to the philosophic can at times be very aberrant and disjunctive indeed, and the maturity of Keats's finest poetry is to be measured in terms of the absence of such aberration, as in his most successful sonnets, which require all transitions to be smooth, almost invisible.

The yearning for sensation rather than thought is only a yearning – a youthful, but in poetry, an often excrescent hedonism, and Keats persuaded himself increasingly to make it submissive to the supportive and steadying power of thought. If enchantment is only a willed departure from the real not precluding a return to the real, intelligent sensations, when overpowering,themselves create a rhythm for intuitive thought, as Keats was getting to know well enough to be, for example, able to say in *Lamia* that the "treat" from "the sweets of Fairies", with their strong appeal to "the mad poet", would in time wear themselves out and give way to the yearning for a "real woman".[1] By the same logic, there had to be considerable room in his poetics to the antithesis of delight, and

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accordingly Keats must be understood to have fashioned his poetics with the weft of suffering on the warp of delight. The poetics of suffering, of which Eliot more recently has given us another version, was also deeply embedded in the mind of Keats, whose poetics of suffering seem, by implication, already to think even of romantic intensity as a compensatory gesture to the growing tiredness of Christian piety and a result of the reinviogation of an outworn religiosity at the altar of poetic imagination.

The dialectical interfusion of antithetical ideas in Keats grew into a genuinely complex organism subsuming varieties of sensations - of joy, of suffering, and of joy and suffering blended; and at least two varieties of thought - the thought of ideality or of cold inhuman abstraction, and that of actual human frailty and strength, of mortality and its imaginative transmutation. The interfusion, in other words, is creative of poetic thought, but thought not strained for as in philosophy, but intuited in such a way as to be comprehensive and to keep all partisanships in suspension. The interfusion of opposites in Keats's mind led to the poetics that inspired and steadied his best poetry - a poetics of an integrated selfhood, of intensity and vitalistic fervour sobered by thought, and partaking, without disjunctive shifts, of agreeables and disagreeables, toughness and tenderness, romance and realism, enchantment and actualities, diligence and passivity, and the sombre and the light-hearted. To attain to the truest poetic self, to the fullest freedom of an interpretative imagination - was for Keats the loftiest and the deepest moment of achieved integrity for the poet; but he also knew that this could not be an abiding state of mind and there must be a shift from the poetic self to the non-poetic self, for the poetic itself could be nourished and replenished only by the non-poetic, and intuition itself could come to its full strength only out of a habit of watchfulness upon the mind. When the poet's mind grows by such intuition and interfusion, the vices of abstract thought or cold philosophy do not visit upon the poetry and the poet's poetics; and a poet so equipped is never to be pinned down to a rigid theory constructed in the abstract to be consistent and complete, for his poetics leave scope for the haphazards of imagination while implicitly putting a value on orderliness too. It is poetics made more out of afterthought than forethought, and unlike Shelly's poetics in his *Defence of Poetry*, concentrates more on the making and the objectivity of the endproduct than on its affective powers. Thus in the poetics of Keats, emerging from his poetry and his prose, there is an internal validation and an inclusiveness in which the dread of science was a singular negation, perhaps because the smell and the scalpel of surgery haunted him too much.

III

That poetry itself, its mystery, power and workmanship, is very often a subject which the poetry of Keats turns upon, cannot for long remain unnoticed to any reader. But for the poetics of Keats to be seen as built on an ongoing interchange of opposites, such as the "eagle's watch" and the "social smile",[2] it requires some patient and elaborate unburying. Our focus for that end is to be on how contrary ideas interfuse to give Keats his enabling insights, his actual

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modes of imagining and making. Keats, for example, all through implies the dichotomy of the poetry of sensation and the poetry of thought; but it may be said that the interfusion of these two components increasingly constitutes the principle actually functioning in his composition. In the same manner, other opposites may be seen as actively blending in the imagination to sustain the poetic utterance. The ideas in Keats's poetics thus often appear to be paired, first in a state of active resistance to each other and then coalescing or folding in to generate the insight into his actual working principle.

Poetry as enchantment, as luxury or intoxication,was from the beginning an overpowering idea for Keats. But the early Keats also had the idea of poetry as social thought, as experession of fellowship in joy and suffering among the human kind. The ideas look to me to have been paired or made to fold in upon each other, thereby clearing the way to some of his best verse and to his incremental poetics. In the very first poem of his *Poems* 1817, Keats uses a phrase - "interchange of favours"[3] - in a context remote from our present concern, but we may say that interchange of favours among the many discrete powers of the mind is what Keats increasingly sees poetry to be turning upon on the evidence of his own poetry and his poetry about poetry. It is this evidence that we must now look for.

True to his romantic heritage, the earliest Keats names nature, or the delight in nature, as the great source of poetry. Nature, for him the "Maker of sweet poets", is thus eulogized by him in the first poem of his first volume -

> For what has made the sage or poet write
> But the fair paradise of Nature's light?
> In the calm grandeur of a sober line,
> We see the waving of a mountain pine;[4]

Nature as the animating source of poerty, basic and creedal to romanticism, is also the springboard for Keats into his abode of enchantment, which transports the poet, as it were, to unearthly imaginings, and fills his mind with -

> Shapes from the invisible world, unearthly singing
> From out the middle air, from flowery nests,
> And from the pillowy silkiness that rests
> Full in the speculation of the stars.[5]

Neither nature nor enchantment can however be an unalloyed source for Keats's kind of poetry, for they are shot through with each other, and each is also dressed out for the new poet in the specifics of heritage or tradition. By his conjuration of the "gentle spirit" of poets such as Spenser, Keats really calls upon tradition perhaps as a secondary source of poetry. To the world of flowers and wonders costumed by distinguishable poetic traditions, the poet needs to

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bring his instinctive energies, which in truly mature poetry mean also the power of interpretative imagination, capable of telling one reality from another or of finely discriminating between the fair and the foul. The first visitations of reality on Keats's poetry were very fitful, and they appear only as the idealistic aspirations of a rather outworn chivalry, which in a way impeded Keats's imagination from coming to its fullest freedom, and which characteristically expressed itself as the self-gratifying wish to be protective to women as in his poem,"Imitation of Spenser".[6]

The idea of heritage or tradition is extended in Keats in the first of his poetic "Epistle"[7] (To George Felton Mathew), where he affirms his sense of "brotherhood in song", and this now includes fellowship with the living poets too. The need for imagination to be interpretative is here clearly underlined, for Keats goes on to dwell on the necessity to put on a "soft humanity" and to "moralize", "to mourn the fearful dearth of human kindness" and to rely on these "incitements" so that the poet can "tease" the "niggard Muse". In the second "Epistle"[8] (To My Brother George), Keats again values poetry as creative of enchantment and its dreamlike beauty as reductive of earthly beauty, and indeed he thinks of the proper "poetic lore" as full of wonders which would "make the Poet quarrel with the rose". The poet's joy, he appears to say, in creating these marvels would however be exceeded by "posterity's award" to him, which is conceived as poetry's continuing power to bewitch readers of all ages. There obviously is an excess in the language of these commitments, even in the light of the nature Keats himself. What should be emphasized at this point is that Keats came to be uneasy about this excess perhaps aided solely by the wisdom of his self-education, for in another verse "Epistle"[9] (To Charles Cowden Clarke) only a month later, he imagines a ride in a "shatter'd boat" in the "stream of rhyme", and confesses of "scarce knowing my intent" and also that -

. . . . my thoughts were never free, and clear,
And little fit to please a classic ear,

However, as the poem advances, he gathers courage to resolve to go forward to a "consummation", and is thankful to his addressee, a non-poet, for making him aware of the great varieties of poetry and its interfusion of contrary virtues such as "the grand, the terse, the free, the fine" and so on.

In the sonnets[10] of the 1817 volume, Keats admits into his poetics a movement away from enchantment and reveals his fascination with the rudiments of the idea of the poetry of "social thought". In the first sonnet (To My Brother George) he rhetorically asks -

But what, without the social thought of thee,
. Would be the wonders of the sky and sea ?

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In the seventh sonnet, that on solitude, the poet accepts solitude to be a bliss only when "two kindered spirits" retire into it. In the thirteenth sonnet, Keats admits into his verse his direct social and moral criticism - a criticism that proposes to "frighten" - "A money - mong'ring, pitiable brood" into "hooded shame". The poet here reminds himself of the need for "High-mindedness", for a "jealousy of good", and urges upon himself and the world the "affection for the cause/Of steadfast genius, toiling gallantly". In the explicit terms of this poem, to toil now is not merely to toil for the poem, but to engage the imagination to portion out shame, and therefore also glory, for modes of social thought and social action. The imagination is thus to be interpretative and is not to be neutral in the choice between the money-mongering and the high-minded. To be noticed in this sonnet is also the emphasis on the diligence of genius and not on the passivity of one transported into luxurious enchantment. In the sonnet numbered 12, what strikes one on the surface is the commitment to the "wonders of the spheres", but in sonnet 14, again, the decisive shift from flowers and wonders to "The social smile, the chain for Freedom's sake" makes Keats go on to affirm that "the hum/Of mighty workings" will give the world "another heart/ And other pulses". In the next sonnet, Keats rejoices that "The poetry of earth is never dead". This poetry of the earth and of social thought appears about this time to have been set in his mind against the poetry of mere flowers and wonders. In sonnet 16, "high feeling" is to be reaped for poetry from patriotic theme, which, Keats says, can give "tremendous birth/To a loud hymn". Very interestingly, as if to fix limits on patriotism and to keep it within the bounds of humanity or not to let it degenerate into xenophobia, Keats expresses a yearning for skies and greenery other than those of happy England.

"Sleep and Poetry",[11] the longish last poem in Keats's first volume, comes close to being a manifesto poem, in which, in an "ardent prayer", Keats asks to be blessed with great gifts for poetry. The appeal to "strange influence" lingers on,but the poet's "imaginings" are also domesticated, made to hover round the fire-side. Not to remain unnoticed is the fact that the poet's aspirations are, among other things, now to be focussed on the events of the world. Very centrally placed in this poem is Keats's wish to -

> Write on my tablets all that was permitted,
> All that was for our human senses fitted.
> Then the events of this wide world I'd seize
> Like a strong giant, and my spirit teaze
> Till at its shoulders it should proudly see
> Wings to find out an immortality.

A little later in the poem, Keats firmly states that enchantment is not for ever to enslave his imagination, and as he bids farewell to mere fancies, he is dismissive of a never never romanticism in his emphatic "Yes" in the following lines -

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Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,
Where I may find the agonies, the strife
Of human hearts :

But Keats will not part with one, to be all for the other, for even the pursuit of reality along a narrow lane like the pursuit of mere fancies has its own hazards, and though he is glad when a sense of reality dawns on him in the wake of a spell of fancies, the poet is to be cautioned against the negative powers of mere reality, when pursued without aspirations, to drive the soul into nothingness. And so Keats seems to me to resolve to retain both the spells - of fancies and of reality -upon his poetic mind, as he says -

The visions all are fled - the car is fled
Into the light of heaven, and in their stead
A sense of real things comes doubly strong,
And like a sudden stream, would bear along
My soul to nothingness : but I will strive
Against all doubtings, and will keep alive
The thought of that same chariot, and the strange
Journey it went.

This resolution to keep on with the flights of fancies and to alternate them with returns to reality is Keats's way of making both reality and fancy, in isolation and in interfusion, abiding sources for his poetry. Thus being born with or inheriting the romantic love of enchantment, Keats works himself into a romantic's commitment to social awareness, to interpretative imagination, to be switched on, as we will find more and more, by a sense of fellowship in suffering.

In "Sleep and Poetry", as also again and again in his letters, Keats appears to be aware of history streaming in upon his enlarging and deepening consciousness and upon the substance of his poetry. On the evidence of this manifesto poem, there is, in Keats's poetry itself, a developing view of poetry as now favoured and now disfavoured by contemporary history. What should be noticed in the lines below is the emphasis on the word "present" as Keats begins to voice his reaction against the desiccation of high imagination -

.... Is there so small a range
In the present strength of manhood, that the high
Imagination cannot freely fly
As she was wont of old? Prepare her steeds,
Paw up against the light, and do strange deeds
Upon the clouds ?

There is thus much scope in the poetics of Keats for a licensing of the imagination to counter the drabness that kills the creative zest. Imagination, as it turns

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out, is also to effect, first, a release from the "musty laws" of the neo-classic poetic lore, and then a renewal of the "potency of song" and an increase in power "To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man". Bidding adieu to "Despondence", Keats assures himself that -

.... there ever rolls
A vast idea before me, and I glean
Therefrom my liberty; thence too I've seen
The end and aim of Poesy.

Ready to be martyred to poetry, Keats, however, finally affirms not so much the luxury and intoxication as the "toil" and the "turmoil" - the now nervous and now relaxed but finally the heart-easing aim to work out a poet's salvation by the alternating and interfusing passivity of the flights of fancy and the diligence of a piquantly interpretative imagination.

There is a sure relization in Keats by 1818 that there is to be no great poetry out of enchantment alone. Keats indeed says that to be too much "Beyond the sweet and bitter world" might mean insanity, and that a long stay *there* might "bar return".[12] So the poet resolves not to lose the sight of the "remember'd face" and not to "lose his mind on mountains black and bare", for he must keep "his vision clear from speck, his inward sight unblind". This, if anything, is an initially overfanciful poet's hard-earned wisdom, a sublimation out of a disadvantaged poet's combative self-education. The poetics of Keats in this way marks out two great moments in his imagination -first, the departure from the real to the unreal and then a return to the here and now of the workaday self. Poetry seems to result from a blending of these two movements. Significantly, in "The Ode to a Nightingale",[13] Keats thinks of imagination (called "fancy" in the poem) as a "deceiving elf", creative of illusions both sedative and intoxicant, but he clearly disfavours their prolonged effects inasmuch as they fall short of real fulfilment and only leave us at the end to unbearable for-lorness. In this great ode, he is thankful to the real world, for it tolls him back into it and also to his "sole self", where, by implication, the poetic is not to obliterate the non-poetic. The poet, on the general showing of many of his letters also, is wise to submit to being often a non-poet in order to ensure his being a better poet. In other words, it is self-defeating for poetry to seek to deal with the intrinsically poetic in isolation and that for its very substance and appeal it must traffic with and turn the non-poetic itself into poetry.

The intriguing distinction between the poet on the one hand and the fanatic and the savage on the other in "The fall of Hyperion"[14] gives Keats's internalized image of the poet greater perspicacity. The fanatic and the savage also imagine and dream, but the poet alone is able to give his visions an embodiment that endures, for as he says -

.... the fine spell of words alone can save
Imagination from the sable chain
And dumb enchantment.

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The crucial requirement for the poet is therefore to be "nurtured in his mother-tongue", which in itself is not an ivory-tower but a socializing commitment. Imagination must also be at once free and not free; it must accept the subjection to actualities and to languages, and also effect its release from them. It must be both toil and cessation of toil with numberless departures from one to the other. Some of the dangers that beset the poet's search for poetry appear to find symbolic representation in "The Fall of Hyperion". At one point, the poet-narrator, begs of Moneta, the High Priestess, to purge off his "mind's film", that is, to purify his vision and to give it clarity, and Moneta then insists that to be able to reach the height, presumably of imagination, he must learn to be one of those-

.... to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let them rest.

What Moneta further says may be thus summed up: Those who sleep away their days thoughtlessly will not attain the height, the supreme powers of imagination. Indeed, one never will get to the temple, will merely rot on the pavement nearby, unless one is able to "feel the giant agency of the world" and to "Labour for mortal good" - "like slave to poor humanity". To be a poet in the best sense one must not be a mere weak visionary, but must learn to "seek no wonder but the human face". By Moneta, the poet-narrator is also thus accused and advised-

Thou art a dreaming thing
A fever of thyself - think of the Earth;

Moneta's command to think of the earth is in truth a command to tame the feverish, sensation - mongering, enchantment-loving, and self-gratifying imagination by intuiting one's way into the reality of *suffering*, and this alone can prelude the relization of the poet's greatest powers. The mere dreamer venoms his dreams, but the poet who feels a fellowship with suffering humanity can paradoxically create a happiness to be shared and so Moneta's advice in the following seems in truth to be sounded by Keats to himself -

Every sole man hath days of joy and pain,
Whether his labours be sublime or low :
The pain alone; the joy alone; distinct :
Only the dreamer venoms all his days,
Bearing mere woe than all his sins deserve.
Therefore, that happiness be somewhat share'd,
Such things as thou art are admitted of
Into like gardens thou didst pass erewhile,
And suffer'd in these temples: for that cause
Thou standest safe beneath this statue's kness.

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The emphasis here must be seen as falling on the fact that the poet has *suffered*, and only in its wake he now stands safe in the temple of imagination, for by this suffering he has ensured his humanity, his fellowship with his own kind in woe and in joy. To Moneta, the poet-narrator now answers that he rejoices in his "sickness", for the sickness is not "ignoble", and also because it is "medicin'd". Further, he asks to be assured that poetry is not "useless", that the poet is also "a sage; /A humanist, physician to all men". Moneta assures him that the poet does palliate sufferings, and that while the mere dreamer only vexes the world, the poet, being "sheer opposite", is creative of anodyne. True poetry depends on a poet who strives and searches for it and derides "mock lyrists", who are only "large self-worshippers" and "careless Hectorers in proud bad verse". Later, the poet-narrator receives the boon of being able to "see as a god sees" and to take in "the depth of things" with his mere mortal senses, by setting up, as it were, what he calls an "eagle's watch". The poet in consequence finds the power that "marries sweet sound with the grace of form", which sounds like a phrase toward a definition of poetry. So understood, the fragment of this poem is a dramatization of a poet's search for the true poet in himself, and this true poet is dependent not only on the findings of his eagle's watch, but also on his ability to smile the social smile. Thus enabled, the poet in Keats's poem "Welcome Joy"[15] wishes to write of the day and of the night and of the fair and the foul together, and to "Laugh and sigh, and laugh again".

In the 15-lined poem of 1818 called "The Poet",[16] Keats very significantly defines the poet's distinctiveness in terms of the social aspects of his humanity - his ability to get out of himself and be the poorest with the poor and be a king with the king. He is also to be the finest ventriloquist for all things animate and by implication also of all things inanimate, and is further to have mastery over his mother tongue, which is a social instrument of fellowship. By this definition of the poet, poetry is a form of ventriloquism, an art where the real identity is suspended to achieve the reality of an imagined identity. In this poem, Keats also seems to be to put more substance on his originally skeletal idea of the interchange of opposites in and for poetry, for the poet here finds his way, among other things, to the high-flying eagle's instincts as to the perching wren's and also extends the benefit of the mastery over his mother tongue to one and all.

The scope of the creative interchange of opposites is increasingly widened in Keats's poetics to include that between sensation and thought and between poetry and philosophy. By Keats philosophy is here and there thought of as destructive of poetic imagination, for, as in *Lamia*,[17] "all charms" seem to vanish "At the mere touch of cold philosophy". But this is only the philosopher's cold and abstract philosophy, not philosophy in poetry's own terms, and this cold and abstract variety can "clip an Angel's wings", and -

> Conquer all mysteries by rule and line
> Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine -
> Unweave a rainbow ....

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But in the poem on "Milton's Hair",[18] Keats, desiring that his "rhyms" would be free from "childish fashion", looks forward to growing "high-rife" -

With old Philosophy

And mad with glimpses of futurity !

These two views of philosophy - philosophy as cold and philosophy as aid for glimpses of futurity, seem to give the poet the necessary resistance to the distinctive modes of philosophy and at the same time a relaxed openness of his modes of poetic imagination to the content of philosophy. When poetry is not dislocated from its own modes of intuition and utterance, it can absorb the content of anything, though for Keats not that of science, but certainly that of philosophy, into its texture. Poetry in other words does not philosophize by cold and consecutive reasoning; it either takes philosophy to give it a poetic texture or creates a poetic texture that can suggest a *philosophy* without arguing it with philosophy's tools and methods. The poet in other words philosophizes as, or in so far as, the sea-bird in the following passage of Keats philosophizes -

.... What sea-bird o'er the sea

Is a philosopher the while he goes

Winging along where the sea water throes?[19]

In the 1818 "Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds",[20] Keats returns to the theme of philosophy and says regretfully - "and so philosophize/I dare not yet". He despairs of ever attaining to "High reason, and the lore of good and ill" and questions if imagination cannot escape being "Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind". Keats appears here to regret the inability of poetry to systematize and dogmatize, but even the systems and dogmatisms of philosophy cannot silence challenges from other systems and other dogmatic philosophies. And as T. S. Eliot reminds us - "Metaphysical systems are condemned to go up like a rocket and come down like a stick".[21] When philosophy itself cannot gurantee the infallibility to its findings, it cannot but accept that it must not be allowed to shut up the poet's shop after admitting the ultimate impenetrability of some of the mysteries that it raids. In the "Epistle" to Reynolds, Keats does what precisely the philosopher must not appear to do: he admits that there is no ultimate answer to the question as to why man never attains full happiness. The poet in Keats thus refuses to stop being a poet in order to be a philosopher, and as a poet, at least in the "Epistle" we are considering, he allows his search for the truest poetic self to rest upon the poet's version of the philosophy of the tragic reality of existence by saying that he has seen "too distinct into an enternal fierce destruction". At the end there is a paradox by which Keats, like a sea-bird, intuits the philosophy that Shakespeare, among others, had intuited with perhaps the finest spell of

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words, and this is the philosophy which Keats poetically formulates to say that even on the day he gathers "young spring-leaves", he must -

.... that most fierce destruction see, –
The shark at savage prey, the hawk at pounce,
The gentle robin, like a Pard or Ounce,
Ravening a worm ....

And if this is the philosophic poetry that Keats secures from his eagle's watch, the very idea of epistles in verse is a gesture toward what he calls the social smile. The poetry of social smile is diffused throughout Keats and is rather subdued, but about its presence there is no doubt, for it can be sighted and felt in some of the sonnets, even in a great ode like "To Autumn" and in a good deal of his minor verse such as the satire of the poem called "Oxford".[22]

Keats's theory of "negative capability" is too wellknown to need quotation. But his prose statement about negative capability has also a poetic version which is worthy of quotation from the poem – "The Thrush said ....".[23]

□ fret not after knowledge – I have none,
And yet my song comes native with the warmth.
□ fret not after knowledge – I have none,
And yet the evening listens. He who saddens
At thought of idleness cannot be idle,
And he's awake who thinks himself asleep.

The idea that one cannot be truly idle when distressed by the consciousness of idleness is not at all a mild Oscar Wildean firework, for it implies that to think in the wrong way and at the wrong time is to unsettle or disable an innate or positive capability. The way that Keats benefits in his poetry and in his poetics from an interchange of opposites intimates to us that this negative capability too does have an opposite, and it is possible that somewhere he gives this opposite just as good and striking a name. My search for this name for Keats's positive capability seems to be rewarded by the phrase - "innate universality", which occurs, significantly, in a remark on Shakespeare, who also figures in the statement on negative capability. In the marginal note in the folio copy of the plays of Shakespeare, Keats is known to have written these words - "The genius of Shakespeare was an *innate universality*; wherefore he laid the achievements of human intellect prostrate beneath his indolent and kingly gaze : *he could do easily men's utmost*; his plan of tasks to come was not of this world. If what he proposed to do hereafter would not in the idea answer the aim, how tremendous must have been his conception of ultimates!"[24]

Negative capability may be understood as a relaxed and unbegrudged state of readiness of a creative mind to be in a state of half-knowledge, a mist; a state in which it is not irritated by any yearning for the unknown or perhaps unknowable half of knowledge. Keats seems to me here to be silent on whether

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and how the known half of knowledge is of use in creation, for his concern is to insist that not to care for or be in irritable yearning for the unknown half of knowledge is a capability - an *absence* of mind that becomes a *presence* in the work created. It is the infusion of this absence that becomes a presence into the work of art itself that Keats calls a negative capability and thinks that it is precisely this that distinguishes a Shakespeare, who is negatively capable, from a Coleridge, who is not. But from the way we have seen Keats's mind to be at work with ideas, it may be reasonably expected that he would naturally not stop at negative capability, but go on to think of a positive capability, a presence in the mind that is active without any irritation or application in the sense of mechanics, but a presence all the same in the mind of the creator that by its innate power eases its way to the verbal utterance. It is this that stands in Keats in opposition to negative capability and very appropriately he calls it an *innate universality*. This power of the mind as he says is given; it is in some sense in opposition to intellect, which is not indolent; but innate universality, though said to be indolent, is also a "kingly gaze", and a gaze is an intent look, not without purposiveness, and Keats believes that this kingly gaze receives from or reaches out to "ultimates" in their wholeness without the application of intellect, as Shakespeare to him seems to have done. I believe I have been able to suggest here by juxtaposing innate universality and negative capability that there was in Keats an acuteness of mind in perceiving the creative mind's operations - an acute-ness more free and penetrating than that of Coleridge in his celebrated distinction of imagination and fancy.

In the minor Odes of Keats also, the critical consideration of poetry keeps flashing in, in some of them to be the sole theme, and in others a less considerable presence. "Ode to Apollo", "Hymn to Apollo" and "Ode to May"[25] deal directly with problems of poetry. "Ode on Indolence"[26] can be read as a poem effecting a willed abnegation of the poet's poetic self, but the shift made here is not to the wakeful non-poetic self of "busy commonsense", but to a state of indolence in which love, poetry and ambition are reduced to phantoms which the poet thinks can spare him of annoyance by vanishing. In "Ode to Fanny",[27] where Keats confesses of a tormenting jealousy, continues the theme of the desire for indolence when the poet cries out: "O ease my heart of verse and let me rest". Keats in this poem categorically wishes the "stifling numbers" to ebb from his "full breast", but he intriguingly accepts that he must be, as it were, leeched to relieve himself of his jealousy, and so contradicting his initial withdrawal from poetry, he cries out again, "A theme! a theme! great Nature! give a theme". This cry for a theme, and that too the theme of the self-torments of jealousy, perhaps gives us some of the saddest words ever uttered by a young poet in the surest Knowledge of his great but hopeless love, an advanced state of consumption and impending death. The wish to be near Fanny and the wisdom of keeping away from her seem to me to be parallel to the wish to continue to be a poet and the wisdom of ceasing to be one. These two Odes of Keats on the

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slowly but surely failing powers as man and poet seem to be at the farthest remove from the mood in "Imitation of Spenser",[28] where Keats confidently thought that by poetry he would "beguile" even "Dido of her grief" and "rob from aged Lear his bitter teen". The irony is that his own grief, his tormenting jealousy and the slow dying, robbed him of those powers by which he thought of relieving the sufferings of all men and women, living as well as fictional.

To the last sonnets[29] we must not turn to see how poetry figures in them. In the sonnet on reading *King Lear*, it is made explicit that Keats, an avid and tireless reader of Shakespeare, values in him the supreme interpretative gift that went with his imagination; and Keats for sure has this in mind when he asks this "Chief Poet" for "new Phoneix wings to fly at his desire". Inthe sonnet called "To Spenser", Spenser is the "Elfin Poet", and here Keats expresses the hard-earned wisdom that the poet, like the flower -

.... must drink the nature of the soil
Before it can put forth its blossoming :

In the sonnet "On Visiting the Tomb of Burns", the caution against "sickly imagination" is sounded loud and clear. A more interesting variation of this theme is in "Read Me A Lesson, Muse", where Keats characteristically wishes to limit men's and therefore also the poet's knowledge of heaven and hell and also of "man"s sight of himself". Here he seems to be rejoicing at his own negative capability in the sense that what his eyes see -

Is mist and crag, not only on this height,
But in the world of thought and mental might.

There is a third variation of this theme in "Why did I Laugh?", where Keats is pleased that there is no answer to the question implied in the title from "Heaven and Hell and Heart". And finally, "To sleep" is an expression of the desire to be saved from "curious conscience" which burrows like a mole. And perhaps the poet's call to sleep is a variation of T.S.Eliot's theme of the human kind unable to bear very much reality.[30]

IV

I wish to end this essay on Keats with speculations about the many lines of probable developments, of which he by choice and temperament would have taken one. It is my impression that had Keats lived to a ripe age, he would probably have written a poetry giving in substance and style some aftertastes of the English seventeenth century imagination on the one hand and on the other, some foretastes of a poet like W.B. Yeats, liberated from his early impulse to embroideries. Reading for myself, I find the basis for my first speculation more specifically in some of the later sonnets, and the one that I choose to mention is called "On Fame",[31] where fame is a wayward gipsey girl, and "will not speak to those/Who have not learnt to be content without her". The poetry of Keats, on the showing of this poem as well as scattered lines and stanzas here and there, appear in the seventeenth century way to be capable of thinking sombre thoughts by inventing situational and somewhat dramatized levity. But the aftertastes of

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the easily identifiable seventeenth century would in my judgement have been blended in Keats with Keatsian foretastes of the mature Yeats. Reading again for myself, I found the first Yeatsian foretaste as early as"Sleep and Poetry", in such lines as these -

... and my spirit teaze
Till at its shoulders it should proudly see
Wings to find out an immortality.[32]

The foreshadowed Yeats strikes me again in such lines in "The Fall of Hyperion"-

.... pity these have not
Trac'd upon vellum or wild Indian leaf
The shadows of melodious utterance.[33]

I should indeed say that I keep hearing the Yeatsian Keats time and again, but I must end with one last quotation -

O that our dreamings all, of sleep or wake,
Would all their colours from the sunset take !
From something of material sublime
Rather than shadow our own soul's day-time.

Perhaps it is not quite off the mark to say that the surest mark of a toiling genius in Keats is that as he was getting his grip on the past, he was also growing not only into his present but also to the unreachable future of his life-time.

Notes and References

1. Phrases and passages of Keats's poetry are given from *Selected Poems : John Keats*, (Ed. Edmund Blunden), Collins, London, 1966. This source is hereafter referred to as SPJK. For the quotations from *Lamia*, see SPJK, p 221
2. SPJK, pp 302, 93.
3. *Ibid*, p 57.
4. *Ibid*, p 58.
5. *Ibid*, p 60.
6. *Ibid*, pp 74-76.
7. *Ibid*, pp 76-78.
8. *Ibid*, pp 79-82.
9. *Ibid*, pp 82-95.
10. *Ibid*, pp 86-94.
11. *Ibid*, pp 95-106.
12. "Lines Written in the Highlands after a aVisit to Burns's Country", *Ibid*, pp 371-72.
13. SPJK, pp 255-57.

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14. *Ibid*, pp 293-307.
15. *Ibid*, pp 358-59.
16. *Ibid*, pp 359.
17. *Ibid*, pp 213-30.
18. *Ibid*, pp 348-49.
19. "What can I do?". *Ibid*, pp 363-64
20. SPJK, pp 367-70.
21. T. S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, Faber, London, 1964, p 168.
22. SPJK, p 382.
23. *Ibid*, p 367.
24. "Cowden Clarke on Keats", *Keats : The Critical Heritage*, (ed. G. M. Matthews), Vikas Publications, Delhi, p 407.
25. SPJK, pp 341-44.
26. *Ibid*, pp 344-45.
27. *Ibid*, pp 346-47.
28. *Ibid*, pp 74-75.
29. *Ibid*, pp 393-405.
30. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*, Faber, London, 1969, p 271.
31. SPJK, p 402.
32. *Ibid*, p 98.
33. *Ibid*, p 295.

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Reading Keats Today : An Analysis of The Eve of St. Agnes

Devika Bose

Keats's poetry is two hundred years old. He was born in an age closely following the Industrial revolution and it is hardly possible to imagine today the situation in which he lived and worked, the surroundings that served as material for his poetry and the ideal for which he aspired. While evaluating his poetry, it would be cliche to say that Keats is as relevant today as he was two centuries ago; or that he is a constant source of joy and inspiration to all lovers of poetry. Rather, it would be interesting to analyse some of his poetry to show that it offers scope for new interpretations even today and that some of the problems related to it would lend themselves to fresh analysis.

In this article, I have chosen *The Eve of St. Agnes* for detailed analysis. While re-reading the poem a few questions struck me as they might have struck other readers interested in examining the thematic evolution in his poetry. It is well-known that the poem is built on a series of antitheses or contrasts that contribute to the dramatic framework of the love-story. At one point in the story Porphyro tries to wake up Madeline from her sleep and finding a lute beside her, plays an ancient tune "La belle dame sans merci." What struck me as peculiar is why should Porphyro play this tune to wake up Madeline? Is it simply a beautiful song without any thematic relevance or whether it does have some definite role to play in the poem.

Keats wrote *The Eve of St. Agnes* in January 1819 and the ballad "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" was written in mid April 1819. In a mature poet like Keats it would be rather unusual to insert a particular song without any thematic relevance or rather, with only partial relevance. Specially, when this particular song is treated more fully and more effectively in the later ballad. It also seems unlikely that Keats was altogether unaware of the great suggestiveness of this ancient tune. What seems more likely is that Keats is trying in *The Eve of St. Agnes* to bring his experiences of the past few months to surface which only gets full exposure in the love poems composed slightly later, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and the sonnet on Paolo and Francesca. *The Eve of St. Agnes* seems to be the first poem to reflect successfully Keats's contradictory reactions to women; it projects powerfully Keats's realisations about the satisfactions, ambiguities, and latent destructiveness within the concept of romantic love.

In the first journal - letter to George and Georgiana after Tom's death Keats writes, "My studies .... have been greatly interrupted lately, so that I have not the shadow of an idea of a book in my head, and my pen seems to have grown too goutty for verse."[1] Yet he started reading and composing almost immediately, producing some of the best pieces of his brief poetic career - *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *The Odes* and *Hyperion* during this time. At a first glance

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1. Robert Gittings, *Letters of John Keats*, Oxford University Press, 1970, P. 175.

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The Eve of St. Agnes impresses us as a wonderful love story told in verse, a beautiful picture gallery depicting the medieval times, a romantic Gothic tale involving barons and knights, damsels and beldames, fays and fairies. A closer reading however, unfolds a structure based on contraries and it is interesting to examine some of these.

The story of *The Eve of St. Agnes* is quite simple. The young hero Porphyro comes from a distant country in search of Madeline, his lady love. He has to encounter many dangers and difficulties before he ultimately reaches Madeline's chamber. He offers her a sumptuous feast and proclaims his love for her. The lovers then elope together into the storm. Gittings has noted that at the time of the composition of the poem, either by design or by lucky accident, Keats was reading a small volume of tales in French, which all had the common property of a young man introduced by varying means, into a beautiful young woman's rooms, a love-affair and an elopement.[1] These French romances might have suggested to Keats the inclusion of the ancient ditty "La belle dame sans merci".

The pattern of contrariety that has been noticed in *The Eve of St. Agnes* encourages us to seek for the relevance of the song within the poetic framework. The contrary movements appear in the very first stanzas. The scene is set in winter: "St. Agnes' Eve – Ah, bitter chill it was ! /The owl, for all his feathers, was a cold; /The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass, / And silent was the flock in wooly fold." (lines 1-4)[2] Nature here is hostile wrapped up in a frozen numbness and this atmosphere of bitter chill is further heightened by the indirect references to death : "The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,/ Emprisoned in black, purgatorial rails." The beadsman who appears in the first stanza of the poem is very near death. This overall background of death and decay seems to be the appropriate setting for a medieval love-story fraught with ambiguities. Out of this background of frozen numbness comes Porphyro riding across the moors, his heart on fire for Madeline. He ventures into the castle, is guided by the old beldame Angela into Madeline's bed chamber, adores her exquisite beauty as she sleeps peacefully and then tries to wake her up. Madeline's sleep has been described in a few significant phrases. It offered her a 'poppied warmth', giving respite from both joy and pain. 'Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain.' Keats is already aware of the strange coalescence of sorrow and joy. Porphyro tries to wake up Madeline from this 'azure - lidded sleep' but finds that" 'twas a midnight charm/Impossible to melt as iced stream."

It is interesting that her sleep is described as a kind of 'charm' or 'spell' and from the beginning she appears entranced. She 'broods' all wintry day on love, she is anxious for visions of delight, 'her heart is other where,' she dances 's with vague, regardless eyes' hardly aware of the wild revelry and she is 'hoodwink'd with faery fancy.' In stanza twenty-five Keats explicity says that Madeline 'dreams

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1. Robert Gittings, *John Keats*, Pelican Biographies, 1968. P. 407.

2. Gerald Bullett, *John Keats's Poems*, Everyman's Library, 1944. All references to Keats's poems are from this edition.

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awake.' She is clearly in a state of trance. The reference to 'iced stream' reminds us of 'icy hoods and mails' of the second stanza where Keats talks of the 'sculptur'd dead.' Love and death seems to get inextricably linked from this point.

Then comes the moment when Porphyro, unable to break the "stedfast spell' from his lady's eyes, decides to play on the lute." He took her hollow lute, - /Tumultuous, - and, in chords that tenderest be, / He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute, / In Provence called 'La belle dame sans merci.' (lines 289-92) It has been suggested that this is a mere love - complaint, that Porphyro, being impatient, tries to wake up Madeline with this song. But at another level the song seems to heighten the richly evocative atmosphere of the poem. Madeline is not the typical fatal woman who works for the destruction of her lover. Yet the very inclusion of this song seems to suggest that her exquisite beauty has destructive potentiality. She enthrals Porphyrio in such a way that he feels the urge to undertake a dangerous journey that may take away his life. Keats, in *The Eve of St. Agnes* has particularly emphasized the fierce hostility that Porphyrio may have to encounter in the baron's castle. It is a 'mansion foul' and there was not one breast to offer him any mercy. One false step would mean death. "for him, those chambers held/ barbarian hordes,/Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords, /Whose very dogs would execrations howl / Against his lineage." / (lines 85-88) Animal imagery has been used as also the images of blood and blood-thirstiness." Get hence! get hence! there's dwarfish Hildebrand /He had a fever late, and in a fit / He cursed thee and thine, both house and land : /Then there's that old Lord Maurice, not a whit / More tame for his grey hairs." / (lines 100-104) Angela ultimately leads him to a room which is "pale, latticed, chill and silent as a tomb."

But in spite of all these fearful suggestions nothing actually happens. This seems a part of the double-edged atmosphere deliberately built up in the poem. And the song enhances it. The theme of *femme fatale* is not overtly developed but played as an under-current. No particular woman is pin-pointed but rather the general concept of romantic love is seen as potentially dangerous. Madeline's reactions on waking up from her sleep are particularly relevant here. She is 'disturb'd' by the tune and she utters a 'soft moan'. In the later poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" also the lady made 'sweet moan.' This kind of linguistic parallelism deliberately blurs the distinction between the passive Madeline and the fatal lady and greatly enhances the suggestiveness of this simple romance. Again, when Madeline opens her blue eyes Porphyrio sinks on his knees 'pale as smooth-sculptur'd stone.' The description of the sculptures in stanza two where they are referred to as 'sculptured dead' is not to be missed. Thus there is a constant playing on love and death. Madeline on waking up finds that there is a 'painful change'; her visions and reality do not match. She had asked for visions of delight. Instead she wakes up to a disturbing reality 'that nigh expell'd / The blisses of her dream!' She finds Porphyrio 'pallid, chill and drear' and she begins to weep. In fact, there is a direct contrast between her dream that is 'so pure and deep' and the reality that may not be so pure. The suggestion of taint seems to be definitely there which links the poem with Keats's sonnet on Paolo and Francesca

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written two months later. Keats in fact, was deeply influenced by Dante as is seen in this passage of his letter: "The fifth canto of Dante pleases me more and more - it is that one in which he meets with Paolo and Francesca - I had passed many days in rather a low state of mind and in the midst of them I dreamt of being in that region of Hell." The interchange of love and lust that we find in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and its link with the later sonnet brings into surface the suggestion of destruction that is vaguely given by the song. Paolo and Francesca were placed inthe second circle of Hell along with the Carnal Lovers and Keats in his sonnet describes them thus: "But to that second circle of sad hell, / where 'mid the gust, the whirlwind, and the flaw / of rain and hail-stones, lovers need not tell /Their sorrows, - pale were the sweet lips I saw, /Pale were the lips I kiss'd, and fair the form/I floated with, about that melancholy storm."

I wish to conclude with a reference to the storm into which the lovers finally disappear. The storm is first mentioned in stanza thirty-five at the moment of the consummation of their love : ".... meantime the frost-wind blows / Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet / Against the window-panes; St. Agnes moon hath set." The moment of fruition seems also to be the moment of fragmentation; for a storm is by its very nature destructive, destroying. Porphyro feels that it is a kind of boon : ".... ! tis an elfin storm from faery land, / Of haggard seeming, but a boon indeed." It would offer them a safe cover to get away unnoticed. But it would also expose them to 'iced gusts' and 'frost-wind'. We do not know whether the lovers ever reach their happy home over the southern moors and the last stanza of the poem is deliberately non-committal: "And they are gone : ay, ages long ago / These lovers fled away into the storm."

Thus the tune "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" by bringing to focus the theme of enchantment and destruction considerably heightens the appeal of the poem. It suggests that both Madeline and Porphyro have to experience various deaths before they attain whatever bliss or un-bliss they might have aspired to.

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Keats The Eve of St. Agnes' : Madeline as Centre-Piece[1]

Aniket Jaaware

> To keep *in fashion* is a matter of taste: a man who hangs on to past customs *out of fashion* is a traditionalist: and an *eccentric* is he who puts value in being out of fashion. But on the whole it is better to be a fool within fashion than out of it, if one really wishes to call this vanity by the harsh name of folly.
>
> Immanuel Kant, *Anthropological Remarks on Taste.*[2]

I should state, at the very beginning, that I am not really a Keats specialist. I feel privileged to be reading a paper here on Keats, for my professed areas of specialization are Commonwealth Literature and Literary Theory and Criticism (in as much as anybody can claim specialization). In this paper I intend to read *The Eve of St. Agnes* as a narrative, with some emphasis on devices—and accidents—of framing, staging, representing—in short, narrative devices. I am afraid I do not think myself competent to discuss the relative merits of metrical or other similar devices. Which is to say, I am aware that there is considerable tension between the tableau—like effect of each particular stanza and the linearity of the narrative, but I shall mainly concentrate on the narrative side of things.

The title given to me was "Reading Keats Today". I cannot do justice to the adverbial of time without mentioning that one of the things I am interested in is the so-called crisis in English Studies', and would be interested to know how other teachers explain or justify the teaching of English today, and here in India. With this preamble, I shall proceed to read the narrative.

Let me try to understand what happens when it opens. Traditionally speaking, we could say that there is a masterful evocation of a cold evening: "The owl, for all his feathers, was a cold:" (In. 2, 452)[3], From then on we could go on to talk, in a naive manner of the symbolic meaning of the cold, or in the not-so-naive, evocative manner of a Northrop Frye, we could talk of the archetypal-symbolic values of 'cold'[4], or, talk the meaning that the word might have had for

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1. All references are to the text as found in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott, London: Longman, 1970, pp. 450-480. I am grateful to Freya Barua for patiently listening to this paper and for throwing up some more supportive ideas.

2. The epigraph is from Kant Immanuel, *Analytic of the Beautiful: from The Critique of Judgement with Excerpts from Anthropology from a Pragmatic Viewpoint Second Book*, trans. Walter Cerf, New York: the Bobbs Merrill Company, 1963.

3. This, and several other stanzas could also be read as examples of the use of the figure 'amplification'.

4. To be fair to Northrop Frye's way of doing things we could also say that the poem attempts to transform 'flat romances' and hovers successfully between fantasy/romance and the menacing 'realism' of death. I would also suggest that the narrative fails in its attempted transformation because it is more or less gender-blind .

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a man who has recently lost his brother to consumption, and who, inadvertently, while writing a line, asks the characters to wear warm clothes[5]. Reading further, we could contrast the cold with the warmth evoked later on: "warm gules on Madeline's fair breast" (In. 218).

To use some of the post-1960 vocabulary, in this particular instance some of the vocabulary that Roland Barthes developed for studying narratives[6], the index for what we used to call "atmosphere" or sometimes, the "setting"; is also a metonymy/ synechdoche: "Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told/ His resary ..." (In. 5). Allow me to concentrate a little more on these two indices. The owl I find particularly interesting "The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;" which is obviously to be re-written as: in spite of his feathers. The feathers, which are an integral part of the owl's body, become a kind of optional, external coat that it wears vainly to protect itself from the cold, and the owl turns into a body within a body when parts of its own body fail to protect it. Perhaps I should try to put this differently. What I am trying to say is simply that 'in-spite-of' meaning of the "for" suggests to me at least, that it is as if the owl had feathers mainly to protect itself from the cold, which is not necessarily the case with parts of the body. This is what the cold does to the owl, the narrator seems to imply. The narrator locates the Beadsman's identity at his fingers, telling his rosary, but again fingers that are numb (and so perhaps they cannot really 'tell' the rosary), and in such bitter chill, does the Beadsman really come to know if he misses one bead or if a bead slips through his fingers?[7] The synechdoche seems to me work in a deceptive manner, because what looks like a synechdoche (the Beadsman's fingers -- as integral a part of his body as the owl's feathers), is narrated with such adjectives that the integrity of the fingers with the Beadsman becomes a little suspect, and hence the synechdoche cancels itself out in a certain sense, because the part becomes almost independent of the whole, and hence almost a separate entity, and hence no longer synechdochical in its operation. This is how I understand the operations of two of the initial indices.

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5. See Allot, 477, note to ln. 350, and also W J Bate, *John Keats*, Cambridge (Mass.): The Bellknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 448.

6. Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives", in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, London: Fontana Peperbacks, 1977, pp. 79-124. I have also found Lubomir Dolezel's essay "From Motifemes to Motifs" (in *Poetics: International Review for the Theory of Literature*, 4ed. Teun A. Van Dijk, 1972, pp. 55-90) extremely useful. Dolezel attempts to construct what could be called an integrated theory of narrative levels. It is important to note that the three levels, which Barthes identifies and Dolezel elaborates, interact in both directions -- top to bottom and, importantly, bottom to top. The bottom level is that of 'text' the actual organization words on the page, the top-most level is that of 'motifemes' or 'functions' (friends meet, seduction, escape etc.) The point I want to stress is that at the middle level of 'motif structure', the earlier level is elaborated, and it is here that specified cardinal functions operate, opening up, or closing down narrative possibilities. However, in the process of reading, some of the sequences of functions get re-written, and can be given new names. This also gives added confirmation the somewhat obvious point that the 'fabula' is only a re-writing of the 'syuzhet'.

7. And of course the question is, who is the represented person/ being that is called the Beadsman? The name itself is a kind of metonymy/ synechdoche.

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We should not forget here that we are still trying to understand the initial indices, to be found in the first stanza. A quick view of the subsequent narrative shows that out of the forty-two stanzas, stanzas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 24, 25, 26, 27, 32, 34, 36, 42 mainly contain what Barthes calls 'indices' or 'informants'. The remaining stanzas could be said to contain cardinal functions (nuclei) which open or close alternatives, or their elaborations, or catalyzers. Out of the 42 stanzas then, only 15 stanzas do not help the story move forward, to use orthodox phrase. This is interesting, I think, for when we read the poem, there's the impression of 'more atmosphere than action'. The narrator makes his entry most forcefully in the middle of stanza 5 (in. 41) "... These let us wish away/ and turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there". Reported speech enters in the next stanza: "They told her how..." (in. 46-56). Dialogue in stanza 11: "Saying, Mercy, Porphyro! Hie thee from this place" (in. 98).

I would like to focus on the narrative point of view and the relation it has to the various levels of the narrative. The first time the narrator's presence if felt strongly is, as already mentioned, in in. 41. What is the narrator wishing away, and asking, urging the readers to wish away? The earlier lines had narrated the chambers "glowing to receive a thousand quests" (in. 33), the "carved angels" staring, and then the 5th stanza:

> At length burst in the argent revelry
> With Plume, tiara, and all rich array
> Numerous as shadows haunting fairily
> The brain, new stuffed in youth, with triumphs gay
> Of old romance. *These let us wish away*,
> And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there,
> Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day,
> On love, and winged St. Agnes' saintly care,
> As she had heard old dames fully many times declare. (emphasis added)

The narrator urges us to wish away "these", but I suspect that the domain of reference[8] of the demonstrative is a little indistinct. It seems to me that the demonstrative is supposed to indicate "triumphs gay/ Of old romance". In trying to understand the domain or reference with help from the earlier sentence, the text forces us further and further back, to the moment -- or place if you like -- where the "silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide;" (in. 31), and then co-ordinating clauses bring us to the angels with their "wings put cross wise on their breasts" (in. 36)[9]. The bursting in of the 'revelry' (which I read as a collec-

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8. It is important to realize that 'referentiality' can also be construed as relating to domains, areas, rather than 'singular entities'. It is my hunch (and no more) that an argument around 'referentiality' can be constructed along these lines. This is not the place for it though.

9. I do not know if these angels are 'female' or 'male'. I presume that they are male. But the modesty of covering your breasts, if you are female, could be working here.

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tive noun for a group of revellers, taking support from the line in Keats's first draft)[10] is prepared for in the earlier sentence, with the 'level chambers, *ready*' and '*glowing* to receive a thousand guests;' (in. 32-33, emphasis added). It is to be noted that the bursting in of the revellers will be repeated by Porphyro, when he bursts into Madeline's room (a Madeline who is waiting for something like that to happen -- but in her case it happens too really as it were). The revelry 'fore-shadows' Porphyro's entry into Madeline's room (which is, admittedly, not a 'bursting in'), without becoming a prolepsis.

To come back to the 'wishing away' that the narrator urges us to undertake, we should note that it is to be done in order to turn to a Lady; turn, with a somewhat awkward adjective -- 'sole-thoughted'. To make a point here, the rhetoric of the narration (rhetoric in the sense of organization of utterance) *enacts* this sole-thoughtedness: from the moment when Madeline is mentioned (not by name though, yet), stanzas 6,7 and 8, and the first two lines of 9 (in. 43-74), concentrate fully upon her. First through pronouns and then by her name, Madeline is mentioned as many as 13 times. (I have not included in this count indicators of the sort "whose heart ..."etc.). Equally interestingly, in the reported speech, the implied performer of the ritual is Madeline herself. The narrator reports that

> "They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve
> Young virgins have visions of delight,
> And soft adorings from their loves receive
> Upon the honeyed middle of the night.
> If ceremonies due they did aright..."
> (in. 46-50)

This reported speech is very crucial for out interpretations of the poem as a narrative poem. The addressee of the 'old dames' speech is presumably Madeline. She *enacts* the implications of their speech -- the implication that she too should perform the ritual, if she wants all those things that the ritual promises to deliver.[11] (We could say here that, for the purposes of the narrative, and hence for all practical purposes, Madeline's identity is "constructed" through the 'perlocutionary act' -- and effect -- of their speech.)

It is also interesting that the narrator delineates the old dames who tell Madeline of the ritual to be performed, as telling of it in the conditional: "Young virgins *might have* visions of delight/ ... *If* ceremonies due *they* did aright" (in. 47-50, emphasis added). We could say here that in *enacting* the text of their 'declarations', Madeline, *misreads* the text, the 'young virgin' that she is. I am

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10. For the earlier version, see Allott, p. 456, notes to in. 37 and 39-42.

11. We should also perhaps concentrate on the "As ..." in in. 45. Where are the old dames sitting? Or Madeline? It seems to me that they are all in the "glowing" halls, waiting for the revelry to burst in, and as they wait, the old dames tell Madeline about the ritual.

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saying she misreads their utterances because it seems to me that it is not a command, but a general comment, a piece of information; and she could, if she chose, ignore the implications of their declarations. This is how a general declaration, which is not necessarily addressed to any particular self is made applicable, and is applied, to itself by a self. And not to miss the point, of course, the application is sexual through and through. It is also interesting, that the Lady's name is given only after the ritual is described. Again to make a point, one would say that her proper name she can acquire only after it is 'framed', as they say, by the narration of a narrative-like delineation of a ritual; and the promise of the fulfillment of sexual desires if a ritual is enacted. Contrary to this, the name of the male protagonist is qualified, delayed, only by one single adjective: "Young Porphyro". The strategy of delaying the introduction of Madeline with the fullness of her own name reinforces the general staging of this young woman as an object of desire. It should also be noted that in as much as Madeline is the implied performer of the ritual, the reported speech is proleptic of the 'actual scene' in which Madeline performs the ritual. Considering that Madeline's undressing is a significant part of the narration of her performence of the ritual, the prolepsis anticipates the later eroticism -- but 'eroticism' may be too mild a word to use. There are several other strategies for objectifying her. Please note that I am trying only to sketch out possible interpretations here, nothing more.

What are we asked to wish away, before all this can happen? We are asked, I think, to wish away a particular genre, a particular way of writing and reading: "triumphs gay/ Of old romance. "These let us wish away," -- and presumably turn to the fullness of young Madeline as an object of desire. We should also note that the "old romance" haunts "fairily/ The brain, new stuffed in youth". That presumably is also a proleptic description of Madeline. To make explicit the analogy, the ritual that she will be tole about, as a possibility of performance is also what is indicated by "old romance". For when Madeline actually performs the ritual, she gets more than she was told she would get: instead of visions of delight, she gets the real Porphyro, and instead of "soft adorings" from her lover, there is, as far as I can make out, a complete seduction, and then she and her lover run away, to live, together or not, happily or otherwise. Thus wishing away old romance gives us something which is, for the narrator, better than what old romance and ritual had promised. The narration of the ritual as "old romance" then, framed as it was by the narrator's reported speech, had merely delineated the *possibility* of sexual pleasure. Keats's romance, as the fully present speech of the narrator, *delivers* it, within the confines of narrative.

Having indicated some of the lineaments of a possible interpretation, I would like now to change directions, and take up another significant aspect of the narrative, which is that of repetition. The one basic point about repetition is that repetition is always with a difference. In some cases, the repetition could also be a contrast.

The most obvious repetition is of the 'cold' which frames the narrative,

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coming as it does at the beginning and the ending of the narrative. The 'informant' of statues is repeated in the second and the fourth stanza. This is important because from the fifth stanza onward, their stasis (even if they are angels, as in in. 34) is going to be contrasted with the "bursting in" of the "argent revelry". The carved angels are narrated as"... hair blow back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts". This is again crucial for our interpretation of the poem because as far as I can make out, the next time that we are given a picture of breasts it is going to be the following: "Full on this casement shone the wintry moon/ And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast" (in. 218-219). The word 'breast' occurs once between these two occurences -- without the full masculinity and emphasis of masculine rhyme -- and it is my suggestion that that occurence mediates the passage from the breasts of angels to those other ones, unmistakably objects of desire in the narrative. The word occurs when the narrator is speaking in his own voice, as it were, and urging (whom? the reader?) that Porphyro's entry into the castle remain a secret, and then the narrator says: "not one breast affords/ Him any mercy, in that mansion foul/ Save one old beldame, weak in body and soul" (in. 88-90). We are taken from the angels' breasts to Madeline's, through the detour of a merciful, figurative, metaphoric breast (which in turn is delineated through the curious detour of negation: 'not one' -- 'save').

I have already mentioned that representations of static human or angelic figures are frequent in the poem: the Beadsman himself is more or less unmoving, enough to allow us the picture of his frosted breath rising in the air, his movement, such as it is (riseth from his knees, in. 11), is reluctant, and in the second stanza he passes by the 'sculptured dead' who are delineated for 5 lines (in. 14-18), and "soon among/ Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve" (In. 25-26), still again, after all the movement. At the end of the next stanza, the fourth, we have the carved angels with "wings put cross-wise on their breasts". It is at this moment of stillness, and punning evocation of the cross that the argent revelry bursts into the waiting chambers. Now, it is particularly interesting I think that, Madeline too is delienated as a kind of stillness and silence. Even though she is represented as dancing, it is with "vague, regardeless eyes" that she dances, and for some time at least, she seems to be sitting still: "... her maiden eyes divine,/ Fixed of the floor, saw many a sweeping train/ Pass by ..." (in. 57-59). As for her silence throughout, it is most revealing that the first, and the *only* time she speaks is at the time of the seduction. It is like the delay in the supply of her name -- she is given voice only after she has been 'prepared' for violation. In my personal estimation the moment of the representation of her speech is one of the most tragic in the history of representation of women:

> 'Ah, Porphyro!' said she, 'but even now
> Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear
> Made tuneable with every sweetest vow,
> And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear.
> How changed thou art! How pallid, chill and drear!
> Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
> Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!
> Oh, leave me not in this eternal woe,
> For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go!
> (in. 307-315)

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I am aware that her demand could be read as a demand for sexual fulfillment. But that interpretation would have to contend with "How changed thou art! *How pallid, chill and drear*!". Neither should we forget that it is only after this urging that Porphyro can 'seduce' her, for it is immediately after this that

> Beyond a mortal man impassioned far
> At these voluptuous accents, he arose,
> Ethereal, flushed, and like a throbbing star
> Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose,
> Into her dream he melted, as the rose
> Blendeth its odour with the violet,
> Solution sweet --
> (in. 316-322)

In the last line of the speech given to Madeline, if we are sensitive to the "little death" (orgasm) meaning of "dying", it is as if she is represented as urging him not to 'finish' quickly, and then her eternal woe could also be read as the woe of unfulfilled desire.[12]

After the seduction, Madeline will be told that it is not a dream -- and she will say

> "No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!
> Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine,
> Cruel! What traitor could thee hither bring?
> I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine,
> Though thou forsakest a deceived thing --
> A dove forlorn and lost with sick, unpruned wing."
> (in. 328-333)

This is all that Madeline will say in the whole narrative -- 16 lines in a total of 378. (Porphyro has 36, not too many lines of dialogue, to be fair.) Porphyro's movement is furtive, for he is stealing into the castle. He is active, and 'daring' in that 'old romance' manner. But there are figurations and prolepses in the delineation of his movements too, and in fact he is narrated as standing still, or sinking into stillness a few times at least: "... Beside the portal doors,/ Buttressed from moonlight, stands he and implores/ All saints to give him sight of Madeline" (in. 76-78). So will he wait motionless again, before he enters the 'marked off' space of Madeline's room, privacy, and the portals of her body, and this time, as he waits, the moonlight will throw warm gules. It is interesting that

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12. We should also note that regarding this scene exactly, which Wodehouse thought would offend Ladies, Keats is reported to have said: "--that he should despise a man who would be such an eunuch in sentiment as to leave a maid, with that Character about her, in such a situation: and should despise himself to write about it, etc. etc. "Wodeshouse's letter to Taylor, quoted by Allott in the notes, pp. 474-475. If Keats did say all that, then it supports the above reading.

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the moonlight is something that he has to hide from, whereas the same moonlight will 'reveal' Madeline, and her nude body. And as he waits, he will watch, as will the readers.[13]

While we are at those lines, we should also note the function of the "meantime":

> So, purposing each moment to retire,
> She lingered still. *Meantime*, across the moors,
> Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire
> For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,
> Buttressed from moonlight, stands he and implores
> All saints to give him sight of Madeline
> But for one moment in the tedious hours,
> That he might gaze and worship all unseen;
> That he might gaze and worship all unseen;
> Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss -- in sooth such things have been.
> (in. 73-81, emphasis added)

The "Meantime" interrupts our gaze on the anxious-to-be-sexually-pleased Madeline, and introduces the active Hero. Our gaze will be returned to us, later on, but then we shall see everything through the eyes of Porphyro, whether it is Angela, or the dainties, or Madeline undressing. The "meantime" has then, the important function of suspending our engagement with Madeline (so that next time she is reintroduced, there will be a certain charge acquired in the delay), and introducing Porphyro. If we pay closer attention to the operation of the "meanwhile" we shall see that it is actually meant to cover up something which a narrative -- or a human being -- can never do: being present at two places at the same time. A lot of sequencing of functions and catalyzers and indices is meant

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13. Ricks recognizes this when he talks of the feast that Porphyro prepares: "By limiting the fest to edibility, we remain at one with the lovers; *like them*, we feast our eyes ..." Ricks Christopher, *Keats and Embarassment*, London: Oxford University Press, 1076, p. 130. It is to be noted though, as we shall later note against Frye as well, that the 'unity' of the lovers is less stable and unified than Ricks thinks, for he 'forgets' that it is undoubtedly a masculine eye that watches. Ricks' general 'robustness' too necessarily has to come under suspicion. It is not merely a matter of being gender-blind, for his writing seems to 'forget' that feminity, womanhood -- call it whatever -- is specifically objectified and codified as an object of desire in a lot of 'healthy, English poetry', by male poets, by Keats, and most particularly so in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. No wonder androcentric critics think highly of the 'elusive, mysterious' quality of the poem! It seems to me that something like Laura Mulvey's work on cinema and the male gaze is more useful to understand the various manipulations of 'point of view' in this poem than quite a lot of criticism available. Jeffrey Baker, for example, spends a lot of time trying to debate whether Madeline really is praying or whether she had sex on her mind when she says her vespers -- see Baker Jeffrey, *John Keats and Symbolism*, Brighton; the Harvester Press, 1986, p. 56: "Keats is not mocking Madeline's behaviour, yet throughout this stanza the reader is always aware that what is being described is not piety but a posture of piety". The scene of the seduction is for Baker, "the great bedroom scene".

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to allow the narrator and the reader to gloss over this specific inability of narrative. Let me elaborate a little, though perhaps I am making too much of something that is obvious to all of us.

Let X be one character and Y be another. Let them be separate in space, outside of the perception-region of the narrator. Now, the narrator can obviously describe either X or Y. But being 'omniscient' and god-like, he wishes to be able to narrate what happens to both the characters when the occupy the same time-zone. The only way a narrator can narrate X *and* Y is by narrating Y first, and then X, and join the two sections with a "meantime" or a "meanwhile" etc.. What I am trying to say is that this adverbial of time, with its sanction of narrative tradition is a way of glossing over narrative finitude, and hence all the more powerful. After the "meantime," the localization also shifts *the 'point-of-view'*.[14] From this moment onward the point-of-view is what we could describe as "camera-over-Porphyro's shoulder". It is this localization that allows us to comment that the reader is supposed to repeat Porphyro, and we should not forget that a repetition can also be a substitution. this repetition is reinforced by the various framing devices, and other repetitions. So that the sequence of Madeline's undressing is 'shown' rather than 'told', and presumably the reader is supposed to watch this 'great bedroom scene' as Jeffrey Baker calls it.[15] The ritual injunction on Madeline, 'not to look behind', which is what Madeline presumably enacts is to the advantage not only of Porphyro, but also to the advantage of the reader who can now enjoy the sight without being seen.

This leads to the structural function of another repetition: that of violations of spaces as yet either un-narrateded, or virgin, in the literal and metaphorical sense of the word. Allow me to try a count again. The bursting in of the revelry in the waiting chambers we have already mentioned, as also Porphyro waiting at the portal doors. His coming too is to be kept secret, the narrator urges, bonding himself with Porphyro, "... or a hundred swords/ will storm his heart, love's feverous citadel." (in. 83-84). Then we have Angela leading him to a safe place, "He followed through ... He found him in a little moonlight room/ Pale, latticed, and silent as a tomb" (in. 109-113). After that most glaringly we

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14. Gerard Genette, in an attempt to refine the conceptual vocabulary of point of view analysis, proposes the word 'focalization' to avoid the 'visual' aspects inherent in the term 'point of view'. Nevertheless, I think it still retains visuality -- and hence a kind of non-verbal association. I propse the term 'localization' as an improvement. This term also allows us to incorporate some of Bakhtin's notions of 'character' and 'point of view' as 'regions/ zones of language-use'. For 'focalisation, see Genette Gerard, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E Lewin.

Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, p. 189.

15. See note 12 on p. 37.

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have the promise that Porphyro makes to Angela:

> 'I will not harm her, by all saints I swear,'
> Quoth Porphyro: 'Oh, may I ne'er find grace
> When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer,
> If one of her soft ringlets I displace,
> Or look with ruffian passion in her face --"
> (in. 145-149)

Porphyro himself is hidden in a closet, (in. 164-165), and Madeline's bed itself is a market off place: "While legioned fairies paced the coverlet/ and pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed" (in. 169-170). After Madeline goes to sleep and is "Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain/ As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again.", Porphyro is described as "Stol'n to this paradise, and so entranced"[16] (in. 242-244). It is instructive to see that even a sensitive critic like Northrop Frye fails to see that the poem is not merely *representation* of "marked off holy spaces", but also an *enactment* of violations of such spaces. Frye writes, "Keats is a poet of the *temenos*, the marked off holy place, the magic circle of *The Eve of St. Agnes* with the lovers inside and hostility and bitter cold outside".[17]

Finally, there is one more repetition, which takes place outside the accepted boundaries of the text of the narrative called *The Eve of St. Agnes*. This is, of course, the title of a poem that Keats wrote *after* this one: *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (written 21 April 1819).[18] This is of course the song that Porphyro plays on the lute (which incidentally *belongs* to Madeline).

Before we go back to that moment when he plays that ditty, let us venture a brief, and perhaps too quick an interpretation of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. The poem represents female pleasure which the masculine knight-at-arms understands (can understand) only as his own emasculation. This poem too is obviously sexual. The narrative situation makes it more or less clear that the knight-at -arms feels emasculated.

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16. I am not sure that there is not a pun on 'entranced', as I am unsure also of the pun, in the title of the narrative itself, on 'Eve'. I have not tried to interpret this obvious pun, but considering that the whole poem is replete with sexual imagery and innuendoes, perhaps a detailed interpretation on those lines is possible.

17. Frye Northrop, *A Study of English Romanticism*, Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1983, p. 160. Admitting that Frye is talking the whole of Keats' *oeuvre*, the specific mention of our poem as a kind of synechdoche for all the other poems as well makes it necessary that the comment on *The Eve of St. Agnes* bear the full weight of a comment on the full *oeuvre*. And I think we should note that "marked off" spaces could be holy for reasons other than Christian symbolism. The more one reads critics on this particular poem, the more one is convinced that feminist criticism not only has a point, but also is right in its condemnation of the patriarchal and/or "phallogocentric" canon.

18. It might seem anachronistic to use a poem that Keats wrote about two months later (*The Eve of St. Agnes* was written 18 January-2 February) to understand our narrative. However I do not see why commentary or criticism should imitate, and thus repeat, the chronological order of compostion, especially when Keats' poems are avilable to us in a single, synoptic, synchronic whole.

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Let us go back to the moment when Porphyro plays the lute and see what happens:

... he took her hollow lute,
Tumultous, and in chords that tenderest be,
He played an ancient ditty, long since mute,
In Provence called, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci',
Close to her ear touching the melody --
Wherewith disturbed, she uttered a soft moan.
He ceased -- she panted quick -- and suddenly
Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shoe;
Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone.

It seems to me that when Madeline wakes up relunctantly on hearing this melody, which is the song specifically of 'female pleasure', however mediated by dreams and dreams within dreams and half-disturbed sleep it might be; it is this melody which she is reluctant to wake up from.[19] Also if we pay attention to the fact that when she says "... but even now/They voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,/ Made tuneable with every sweetest vow,/.../Give me that voice again, my Porphyro," (in. 307-312); she could be speaking of two things. First, the sound of the lute which she mistakes for Porphyro's voice, in that know manner of 'real' sounds triggering off 'dream sounds'; or, more interestingly, she 'mistakes' the voice of the knight-at-arms, who speaks the latter two thirds of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, for Porphyro's voice. Now it is most interesting that in that poem too there are dreams, and it is the male protagonist who dreams -- and his dream tells him the truth that "La Belle Dame Sans Mercy hath thee in thrall", and he wakes up to find himself "On the cold hill side". (in. 37-44). There is interesting contrast here in those two narratives which have protagonists of the opposite sexes and genders. In *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, the male protagonist dreams presumably on his own volition, to find himself emasculated on waking up. In our poem, of which Madeline arguably is the centre-piece, she is implicitly told that she will dream (there are traces of voluntarism in the ritual she performs), and this time, without doubt, the narrative is one of male pleasure. So that it is as if women are commanded to dream of man's pleasure, and man's pleasure is real, and moreover Madeline will be given no time at all to think over the matter when her dream ends. On the other hand we should not forget that female pleasure *is* mediated, in the other poem, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, through male pleasure and male anxiousness about emasculation. In that sense it is only

19. Tilottama Rajan sees this poem as a working out of the problem between fiction and reality, within the general world-view of Keats, and a kind of debate between idealism and realism. It seems to me that before all that can really be done, we must consider the work of gender in the poem. See Rajan Tilottama, '*The Eve of St. Agnes*: The Discourse of Eroticism', in *John Keats: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, ed. E Nageswara Rao, Delhi: Pencraft International, 1993, pp. 46-55.

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appropriate that there is no dialogue at all between the knight-at-arms and the merciless woman, who is given no lines at all in the poem. It seems to me that having made Madeline the visual centre-piece, the narrator finds it difficult not to give her some ventriloqual lines -- 16 out of 378 as we have already seen. (On the other hand we could also say that he corrects this mistake in the poem written later.)

I have said more or less everything I can about the bulk of the poem, and now it is time to look at the last three stanzas of the poem. There is one 'informant' line which can be read as a metonymy for the attitude that the castle itself now has for the lovers, and this time *both* of them: "The arras, rich with horseman, hawk and hound". The general sense of the stanza as well is that of menace -- now that the sexual 'dream-time' is over, and the sexual experience is over, the lovers are returned to a post-coital greying of the world, and the 'reality' of the menace becomes almost too much. But we should also note that the metonymy is deceptive, for nothing happens to the lovers as they escape. In fact, something happens to the reader. The reader himself (that is how the narrative situates the reader's gender and gaze), is now returned to his own world, for the lovers, who were till now 'real' in the narrative, now become 'phantoms': "They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;/ Like phantoms, to the iron porch they glide" (in. 361-362). With this noun, the narrator seems to acknowldege the 'un-reality' of his 'characters', and returns the reader to his real world. In case we interpret the simile only as a simile, and miss the point, the narrator makes sure that we appreciate the 'phantastic' nature of the narrative through the most obvious device of the passive voice: "By one, and one, the blots fully easy slide/ The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;/ The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans" (in. 367-369).

I think it only appropriate to end this paper with the last lines of the narrative:

> And they are gone -- aye, ages long ago
> These lovers fled away into the storm.
> That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
> And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form
> Of witch and demon, and large coffin-worm,
> Were long be-nightmared. Angela the old
> Died palsy-twitched, with meagre face deform;
> The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
> For ay unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

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HYMNAL HYMENEAL : KEATS'S "THE EVE OF ST. AGNES"

Subir Kumar Dhar

One way in which criticism has tried to come to terms with the strong erotic element present in many of Keats's poems is by spiritualizing it. This is especially true of critical readings of "The Eve of St. Agnes" which is a poem grounded on the fact of a ravishment. Earl Wasserman's response to the poem is illustrative of just this critical orientation. For Wasserman, "St. Agnes" describes a "spiritual ascent . . . . in Porphyro's progress", and Keats arrives at a "mystic blending of mortality and immortality, chastity and passion, the moonlight of perfect form and the ruddiness of intense experience."[1]

At the other end of the critical spectrum are those who would demy the presence of precisely this evolutionary dynamic. Of us readers, the poet, the poem and its central personae, Marjorie Levinson has this to say :

> Voyeurs ourselves, we watch another voyeur (Keats), watching another (Porphyro), watching a woman who broods voluptuously upon herself . . . The discursive action . . . does not advance from letter to spirit, surface to depth, forepleasure to endpleasure . . .[2]

Widely diversant as these critical responses are, they are generated from a common perceptional core, one that conflates Keats and Porphyro and hence displaces Madeline from the centre of the poem's action to its periphery. Ian Haywood's position is an extreme manifestation (but by no means a unique one) of exactly this trend in the criticism of "The Eve of St. Agnes":

> Although the poem is based on the lingering sexual expectations of both of them, Madeline's desire for the "honey'd middle of the night" is quickly overshadowed by the "purple riot" in Porphyro's heart. From the moment he enters the narrative his point of view dominates. We have no choice but to conspire or collaborate with his role as pleasure-seeker and voyeur. Madeline becomes an object of beauty to be literally ogled at.[3]

In order to correct this Porphyro-bias, I propose to begin this *examen* by briefly looking at a poem by William Blake, using this text as an explicatory device to arrive at a fuller understanding of Keats's poem. Like Madeline, Blake's female protagonist in his poem *The Book of Thel* is a young virgin poised on the threshold of sexual experience. Blake's Thel is both allured by and apprehensive of the experience of love; her fears are answered by four of the most transient but elemental forms of life on earth — a Lilly, a Cloud, a Worm, and a Clod of Clay. Asserting its own ethos of submissive sexuality, the Lilly tells the virgin Thel of the bliss it experiences upon being melted by the summer's heat. When Thel, who is a yet unborn spirit, complains that unlike the Lilly she has no physical body but is rather as insubstantial as a cloud, a

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Cloud descends before her and informs her that he consummates his love with the Virgin dew, and that from their union they "arise link'd in a golden band and never part/But walk united bearing food to all our tender flowers."[4]

When Thel, still unconvinced, counter-argues that if she had a material existence she would be food for worms, a Worm rises before her, "helpless & naked, weeping."[5] The state of the Worm encourages Thel to regard it as a reflection of herself — "none to answer, none to cherish thee."[6] But immediately the virgin is proved wrong by a Clod of Clay which raises its meek head and avouches that fulfilment can be found only by yielding up one's body:

> O beauty of the vales of Har ' we live not for ourselves.
> Thou seest me the meanest thing, and so I am indeed.
> My bosom of itself is cold, and of itself is dark ;
> But he, that loves the lowly, pours his oil upon my head,
> And kisses me, and binds his nuptial bands around my breast,
> And says : "Thou mother of my children, I have loved thee
> And I have given thee a crown that none can take away."[7]

Cumulatively, all these perorations rid Thel of her initial fear, and so when the Clod of Clay offers the virgin maiden the opportunity of exploring the world of mortal love, Thel passes through the portals of existence. Her curiosity and desire to know more is however abruptly terminated. When it becomes clear to Thel that a life of love entails sensory or physical existence, the disembodied virgin spirit flies back "with a shrick".[8] to her original domain of pristine innocence.

Both *The Book of Thel* and "The Eve of St. Agnes" configure rites of passage into realms of sexual experience, even though Thel's journey is aborted while Madeline's is triumphantly completed. Both poems also inwardly reflect a generative index on the lines of the familiar Blakean (and more generally, Romantic) paradigm of innocence, experience, and "organiz'd innocene". In so far as Thel and "St. Agnes" are concerned, this triadic taxonomy is constituted of three successive and mutally exclusive levels of operancy — first of a mind or consciousness reflecting on its own functions, second of a traumatic and alienating recognition of, and discrimination between, interiority and externality, and third of the attainment of an intergrative harmony achieved through the merger or fusion of self and other. In the case of Thel, the first step or stage of this dialectical process is marked by the refusal of the virgin to acknowledge what the Cloud tells her : "Every thing that lives/Lives not alone nor for Itself".[9] This is precisely what the maiden connot register, trapped as she is in a vicious circle of self-regarding. And there are clear indications in Keats's poem too that Madeline is really immured in her own self. Early in the poem we are told, for example, that Keats's heroine was "sole-thoughted", and a stanza later Keats clarifies that what Madeline was looking forward to were the selfish

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pleasures of "visions of delight/And soft adorings."[10] In the next two stanzas we are provided with the further information that Madeline 'scarcely heard" and "heeded not" the music and the revelry in the great hall, that her eyes were "regardless", and perhaps most conclusively — that she was "all amort"[11] or dead to the world outside herself.

Psychologists relate such solipsist illusions of self-sufficiency with what Neumann calls "the [embryonic] situation of contentment and containment," and it now becomes clear that both Blake and Keats equate the states of mind of their heroines with such condition of pre-natal being. Thel's "shrick" with which Blake's poem ends is the infant's *Cri du coeur* at the moment of birth, and that Madeline like Thel enacts a kind of regressive birth-in-reverse is made evident by Keats at several places in "The Eve of St. Agnes." In Stanza XXVII, having shed her clothes, Madeline enters her womb-like curtained bed. Gradually, her "soul" (by which Keats, following tradition, means "consciousness") fades away. Like an unborn infant she is "Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain," and "clasp'd" or curled up in an embryonic sleep. The final image in the stanza communicates Keats's implication with an unambiguous clarity : "As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again."

Madeline's dream-vision of Porphyro has been traditionally linked with Keats's definition of the imagination in terms of Milton's description of Adam's dream of Eve : "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream — he awoke and found it truth."[13] Certainly, Milton was in Keats's mind when he addressed these words to Bailey no less than a whole year and a month of his short life before writing "The Eve of St. Agnes." But given the existent commonalty of Romantic thought, it may be more rewarding to consider Madeline's dream in the light of Blake's analogous conception of Beulah. As Northrop Frye explains,

> Beulah . . . is the world of contemplative thought, of the adoration of some vague mystery enveloping us. It is the world of the consolations of religion, of implicit faith and confident hope. It is the world of romance, of fairy tales and dreams. It is the protected world of the child and . . . the world which the imaginative soul enters when it is still an infant untried . . .[14].

Beulah is also the perimetrical equivalent of a "state of love" in which the "imagination is passive, contemplating and adoring." But, as Frye adds, "in such passivity there is deadly danger if it is persisted in too long. If it reposes so long in sleep as to forget on waking up again that its mistress is its own creature, an independent external world begins to separate from that imagination and it is done for."[15] This, Keats shows in "The Eve of St. Agnes", is what happens to Madeline. The "vision of her sleep", a "midnight charm/Impossible to melt as iced stream",[16] had been so deep that she began to regard it as independent of the Porphyro who kneels beside her. Like its archetype in the Bible, Beulah thus affords visions that are in one sense, dangerous. In *The Song*

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of Solomon which recent criticism has recognised as having a direct bearing on "The Eve of St. Agnes," the beautiful young Shulamite who is the prototype of Keats's Madeline freams of a nocturnal visit from her beloved. But when she rises to welcome him, she discovers to her dismay that he is no longer present :

> I sleep, but my heart is awake; it is the voice of my beloved : He knocks, saying, "Open for me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is covered with dew, my locks with the drops of the night."
>
> I have taken off my robe; how can I put it on again ? I have washed my feet; how can I defile them ?
>
> My beloved put his hand by the latch of the door and my heart yearned for him.
>
> I arose to open for my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my finger with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the lock.
>
> I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had turned away and was gone. My heart went out to him when spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.

In a similar figuration in Blake's poem "The Crystal Cabinet", the narrator sees a beautiful maiden within a world of a "lovely Moony Night," tries to embrace her passionately, but succeeds only in shattering his vision and is "filled with woes."[17] So, too, does Madeline wake up to the woesome reality of a "pallid, chill, and drear" Porphyro :

> How chang'd thou art : how pallid, chill, and drear ;
>
> Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
>
> Those looks immortal, those complainings dear;
>
> Oh leave me not in this eternal woe . . .

What is common in each of these parabolic representations is the idea of a vision of a state of innocence collapsing under the strain of its own frail immaturity. Like the sleep of the Shulamite and the vision of Blake's lover, Madeline's dream had been a self-referential fantasy, and hence imperfect, ephemeral, and inadequate. In the venerable Beadsman in "St. Agnes" we have a parallel in a different key, for this pious old man seeks salvation through the contemplative adoration of a mystery of his own making, a mental syndrome that Keats contemptuously described in a letter to the George Keats as "the pious frauds of Religion".[20] But where the Beadsman (whose endless string of beads is emblematic of his own cycle of unregeneration) is unable to achieve a break through and dies "For aye unsought for . . . . among his ashes cold". Madeline's act of passion liberates her from the womb his of innocence as her participation with Porphyro destroys ever the shackles of selfhood which had

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held her so long in thrall. This, as Keats tells us, is a "Solution sweet,"[22] and he commemorates the liberation of his heroine from the moony Beulah state by providing a circumstantial detail : "St. Agnes' moon hath set."[23]

The setting of the moon however presages the dawn of a new day and it also marks the birth of a new Madeline. As in a real birth, the experience is traumatic and painful, but Keats well knew that pain was both desirable and necessary. "Do you not see," he wrote to the George Keats, "how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? . . . This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity."[24] Thus if Madeline is indeed "A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing, "[25] it is not entirely a misfortune. "Until we are sick, we understand not," Keats had written to Reynolds a few months before writing "The Eve" and had continued : "in fine, as Byron says, 'Knowledge is Sorrow'; and I go on to say that 'Sorrow is Wisdom' — and further for aught we can know for certainty."[26] What Madeline gains, therefore, is Wisdom, and this is a gain far outweighing the pain she experiences, the innocence she has lost.

Like Blake in *The Book of Thel*, Keats in "The Eve of St. Agnes" associates knowledge or wisdom with sexual experience. The difference between the ravished and unravished Madeline may be better understood in the light of Keats's observation in the same letter to Reynolds :

> The difference of high Sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this — in the latter case we are fallings continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with all [the] horror of a bare shoulders Creature — in the former case, our shoulders are fledge, and we go thro' the same air and space without fear.

The "fear" that Keats speaks of here is that of life, of the unknown and the unknowable — "The Burden of the Mystery : a thing I begin to understand a little" — as Keats explained in this letter. "The Eve of St. Agnes," far from being an example of what Byron contemptuously dismissed as Keats's "Onamism of poetry,"[28] is really a celebration of sensuality as the gateway to a fuller, higher, and more satisfactory comprehension of the mystery of life. it is precisely because of this that Keats in the incomparable closing stanzas of "The Eve" introduced his brilliant semiotic intermediation of the tenses, creating thereby a pulsation between present and past, storm and stasis. For through rhetorical scaffold is the achievement of the lovers set free from the trammels of time, and universalized.

We may better understand the magnitude of Keats's vision if we recall those words of Thoreau : "We need to pray for no higher heaven than the pure

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senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life."[29] or, as Norman O. Brown adds in his seminal work *Life Against Death : The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*.

> "the resurrected body is the transfigured body. [with] the abolition of repression . . . the human body would become polymorphously perverse, delighting in that full life of all the body which it now fears. The consciousness strong enough to endure full life would be no longer Apollonian but Dionysian — consciousness which does not observe the limit, but overflow; consciousness which *does not negate any more*.

This is exactly the release that Madeline and Porphyro enact; for if in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" Keats sings of an unravished bride, in "The Eve of St. Agnes" he hymns a ravished one. The latter poem is truly a hymnal hymeneal.

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Limits of Imagination : Re-reading Keats's Odes

Niranjan Mohanty

Introduction

To understand why Keats's poetry has created splash in the literary waters of England and acquired critical acclaim in all ages except his own, is partly to reckon with his own concept of the Man of Achievement and partly to concede to the view that his odes constitute the paradigm of that accomplishment. Re-reading Keats' poetry, and particularly the odes today, with a long tradition of Keats criticism, it is presumably pertinent to discover an element of their relevance to the contemporary world. If Keats's poetry has to bear any relevance today, it has to be critically studied not with the perspective of nature per se, but with the poet's passion for life, even if there are clues which bear testimony to the poet's escapist fantasies.

This paper proposes to advance the view that Keats's odes are meditations on defining the limits of imagination. It further advocates that Keats's odes embody a new concept of imagination which is dialectical and tragic. In other words, this paper is an attempt to ascertain Keats's intense awareness of life which repudiates the escapist fantasy. The function of imagination, as Keats's attitude seems to prove, is to enable him to interpret and recreate life in its totality.

The Odes

The five odes written during April-May 1819 and "To Autumn" in September have been considered to be Keats's major achievement. Many attempts have been made to analyse and interpret the odes variously. In reading the Urn ode, J. R. Caldwell maintains :

> ... not an isolated poem, but stands in specific relationship to other poems. It, is, in fact, one of a group of five odes ... all ... homogeneous in mood, with ideas and images that interrelate and recur ... Most closely related in time of composition, in poetic substance, and in logical statement are the 'Nightingale,' 'Melancholy' and the 'Urn.' In this trilogy the middle poem stands as a comment on the experience of beauty in general; the other two give directly and dramatically specific illustrations of this experience. The structure of the events in the 'Urn' and in the 'Nightingale' conforms precisely to the description in 'Melancholy' of all such events. (Caldwell 166)

Douglas Bush discovers in the odes the variations on a single theme[1] while John Holloway unearths a single mood[2] encompassing the odes. E de Selincourt argues that the odes sum up Keats's attitude to life.[3] G. Wilson knight advocates that a steady resolution of the poet's conflicts is arrived at in the odes.[4] Graham Hough finds in the odes the predominance of themes of transience and permanency.[5] W. Jackson Bate asserts that "no single interpretation of the odes–still less of the odes as a group–satisfies any one except the interpreter."[6]

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David Perkins studies the odes to argue that they reveal a process.[7] It is true to say that Keats had hardly entered critical consciousness before the twentieth century.[8]

The great odes of Keats– "Ode to Psyche," "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on Indolence" and "Ode to Autumn"–might apparently pursue a common theme– "the painful contrast of flux and stability,"[9] but they leave rooms for considering them to be "interior monologues."[10] These odes make attempts to testify and evaluate the limits of imagination. In other words, Keats makes attempts to study or examine the usable nature of imagination in relation to life. He never challenged the validity or authority of imagination as an instrument that plays a vital role in the creative process or in the making of a poem. But he was very much sceptical of its nature and power to bring about a resolution to the fever and frets of life or even to bring in a panacea for the mortals to be gratifyingly redeemed of their mortality. Even if it does, because of its sweeping influence on the poet, its transitoriness indisputable corresponds to its limits.

That is precisely why Keats flirts with a startling uncertainty in "Ode to Psyche" when he says :

> "Surely I dreamt today or did I see
> The winged psyche with awakened eyes ?"

Or in "Ode to a Nightingale, "Keats's" sense of uncertainty creeps in when he says :

> "was it a vision or a waking dream ?
> Fled is that music : – Do I wake or sleep ?"

It is, perhaps, because of the limits of imagination in relation to life or reality that Keats confronts a terrible sense of loneliness in the absence of the nightingale and encounters his "sole self" :

> "Forlorn : the very word is like a bell
> To toll me back from thee to my sole self :"

The repitition in the use of the exclamation is, therefore, significant in the sense that it subsumes an inhibitive factor to the usability of imagination. It is perhaps relevent to note the mood of the poet during the period when the odes were composed keats admits :

> "This morning I am in a sort of
> temper indolent and supremely
> careless:.... My passions are all
> asleep from my having slumbered
> till nearly eleven and weakened
> the animal fibre all over me
> to a delightful sensation about
> three degrees on this side of
> faintness." (*Letters* 315)

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But surprisingly the odes that emerged from this mood were neither 'indolent' nor 'supremely careless'. On the other hand, the odes are the careful meditations on the problems which possessed Keats's mind, and are studies on the limits of imagination in relation to life.

In "Ode to Psyche"– the first in the group of odes – Keats intended to study whether imagination can be used as an instrument to recreate the myths. Even if the poet, after his initial uncertainty and haziness of the dream and reality, insists on building a 'fane' for Psyche, the mortal-immortalised, "In some untrodden region of my mind," and on building "a rosy sanctuary with the wreathed trellis of a working brain," what Keats celebrates in the concluding lines of the poem is the warmth of love and efficacy of an existence that has been immortalised :

"And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
to let the warm love in :"

In other words, the poet employs imagination to revitalise and recreate the myth as well as to celebrate the warmth of human love and the bliss of existence therefrom.

Keats in the Urn Ode tries to discover something permanent, something that can withstand the forces of time, flux and change. Urn for the poet is a product of the imagination and he posits in it the ideals of beauty and truth. But from the very beginning an uncertainty hovers over the poem. This element of uncertainty has been suggested through the rhetorical interrogations :

"What leaf-firnged legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggles to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"

The poet celebrates the timeless quality of the urn through a series of metaphors, such as "unravished bride of quietness," "foster-child of silence and slow time," "sylvan historian" such a celebration seems to have ingrained uncertainty because of the imposing gestures of the interrogations which follow. Morris Dickstein rightly comments :

The silence of the urn, its integrity
and inviolability suddenly seem
to frustrate the speaker into blank
uncertainty and into frenetic interrogation. (Dickstein 224)

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Imagination engenders in the poet's mind infinite possibilities in terms of the tales embedded on the body of the urn – but fails to clarify the poet's queries. The awareness of such a limit, perhaps, compels the poet to conclude in the last stanza of the poem :

"Thou silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity : Cold Pastoral :"

Cleanth Brooks maintains that the figures on the urn, though fixed in their intensity, remain dead in their fixity.[11] Imagination might render a timeless, unageing quality to these pictures, but the absence of fulfilment makes them inferior to human passion that "leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed;/ A burning forehead, and a parching tongue." In the midst of his search for an ideal world, Keats does not feel slight hesitancy to give primacy to the human passion : "All breathing human passion far above." Dickstein considers "far above" to be in shocking contrast to the two lines that harp on the poet's pejorative intention of tendencious rejection of the human passion. Yet "far above" authenticates the poet's priorities which eventually impel him to celebrate the simple innocent rustic life in the fourth stanza and to address the urn "Cold Pastoral," and finally to discover the urn's woes :

"When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours . . . ."

The emphasis on the desolation as depicted in the fourth stanza is possibly a reiteration of Keats's passion for life :

"and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return."

It appears to me that Keats while historicizing the action in this stanza, attempts to show the futility of immobility which lacks the warmth of living. As we come to the concluding lines of the poem, we are made to realize that the 'urn,' idealized as the symbol of silence and timelessness, is seen making human utterances. What the urn articulates might point to the abstraction of the concept of beauty and truth. What matters is the poet's compelling passion to make the silent form speak "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." Language is human and it is a product of time, of the flux of experiences. When Keats makes the urn speak, his intention is to celebrate the human speech. I don't think it would be improper to suggest that Keats' attempt to humanize the urn has become a success. Surely, Keats's intention is to admit honestly that the urn, despite its "attic shape," fair attitude," remains woebegotten. The cause of the urn's woe is nothing but the absence of warmth of breathing or the warmth of human passion and human speech. The beauty, richness and hence the truth of mortality lie in the human passion which Keats celebrates by

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employing imagination through the fixity and coldness of the urn. It would be relevant here to advance that the poet who could discover the veiled goddess of melancholy in the temple of joy, can only hope to celebrate human passion through the veiled beauty of the urn. It is this predilection for life that makes him feel that poetry is the supreme form of art. Thus in trying to advocate for the creative power of imagination, Keats celebrates life and the reality that predicates life. One of Keats's early statements that "scenery is fine – but human nature is finer,"[12] substantiates his preference to "permanent value over value in permanent objects."[13] Man is a creature of circumstances generated by a "world of pains and troubles."[14] Without the compelling effects of this world

> – and what is his altered nature but his soul? – and what was his soul before it came into the world and had these provings and alternations and perfectionings ? – An intelligence – without identity – and how is this Identity to be made ? Through the medium of the heart ? And is the heart to become this Medium but in a world of circumstances.[15]

Keats's attempt to escape from the world of circumstances, from the "Misery and heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and Oppression"[16] is but the reflection of his own realization of the inevitability of all these. There is no escape. One must make attempts to transcend by embracing all the paradoxes which give meaning to life. Keats's imagination which championed the cause of escapist fantasies in his early poetry becomes an instrument or agent that accelerated the process of absorption of the poet into the matrix of the living. It is only through such an absorption, such a civilizing and redeeming wisdom of accepting things as they are that Keats could achieve the desired transcendence and could come very close to the Man of Achievement in literature. Keats in a letter written on April 21, 1819 to George and Georgian Keats, writes :

> at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability* that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.[17]

Much before this letter, Keats in his "Sleep and Poetry" wrote :

> "And can I bid these joys farewell ?
> Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,
> Where I may find the agonies, the strife
> Of human hearts :" (LL 122-125)

Keats, to my mind, in his odes is trying to go for a "nobler life" by adhering closely to the fever and fret of life and by celebrating his own sense of mortality and uncertainty.

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Dickstein aptly observes :

> The Keats of the Odes is a different poet. These poems explore miotifs of escape and transcendence ultimately to overcome them; they are built on a conception of imagination which is dialectical and tragic rather than escapist. (Dickstein 190)

It is precisely the recognition of things as they are and of the worldly elements constantly preying upon human nature that brings Keats closer to Shakespeare. From the very beginning Keats had been conscious of the things real. He writes in "Sleep and Poetry" :

> The visions all are fled – the car is fled
> Into the light of heaven, and in their stead
> A sense of real things comes doubly strong. (LL 155-157)

In no other ode but 'Nightingale,' perhaps, the sense of the real comes to the poet "doubly strong," This overwhelming strength of reality as depicted in the ode, repudiates the authority of imagination and, in a way, tries to impose a limit to imagination. The poem's progress is linked up with the change in the bird from mere being to a symbol. Imagination can shape an experience and give the experience a meaning. But in the absence of the experience and object or being, imagination as an instrument fails to relate the post to his own world in a meaningful way if in the 'Urn' ode Keats has shown the creative power of imagination by elevating the vase to a timeless existence, in the 'Nightingale' ode too, he aims at achieving the same bourne, but in both the poems, the poet seems to have been preoccupied with the transience of the impact of imagination in relation to life. As the urn-world has its woes, the nightingale has its woes too represented by the "plaintive anthem." In the fifth stanza of the 'Nightingale' ode, Keats harps on the real world of the forest – the world of flora and fauna – which may be subscribed to the poet's conscious adherence to be bower motif of his early poetry, but they do meaningfully build up the poet's passionate clinging to life which is ordained and inscribed by senses. In the "embalmed darkness," the poet's adherence to the 'guess' is obviously symptomatic of his love for life. Keats no longer views nature as being separate from life :

> "But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
> Where with the seasonable month endows
> The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
> White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
> Fast fading violets covered up in leaves;
> And mid-May's eldest child,
> The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
> The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves."

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The whole stanza brings in the loveliness, the tenderness of life that is lived in relation to nature. The poet's intention is, perhaps, to shape or mould life with the softness and fragrance of the world of nature. In the absence of the bird and its song, recreated by imagination, the poet's whirling back to his own "sole self" and to experience the ache of loneliness, followed by his emphatic "adieu" to the bird obviously is an assertion of the limits of imagination. Moreover, the whole construct of imagination as it is depicted in the poem seems to have been questioned. The poet's biting sense of uncertainty about the impact of imagination is made explict in the last two lines :

"Was it a vision or a waking dream ?
Fled is that music : Do I wake or sleep ?"

"Fled is that music" – makes it evident that fled is the music of the symbolic bird that has already been elevated to the height of a timeless existence. The spell of imagination breaks down ultimately in the last stanza as the poet is tolled back to the real world. The wakeful anguish of the soul is revived and stirred fully. Brooks rightly observes : "he would fade into the bird's song, but at the end it is the bird's song that fades away from him."[18]

In "Ode on Melancholy" – a poem in three stanzas – Keats intended to show how imagination can approximate and engender intensity to the experience. Further, the poem exemplifies how imagination is responsible for making all disagreeables evaporate or all contraries meet. Personifying Melancholy, keats shows the paradoxical nature of existence and experience :

"She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-moth sips.
Ay, in the very temple of delight
Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine."

It is through the dialectical nature of imagination that Keats intends to discover Melancholy in the shrine of delight.

Whether Keats could achieve a spiritual growth of his mind in his "Ode on Indolence" it is uncertain. But this much is certain that the poet has assumed a state of non-attachment. But for him this phase has its limitations. The poet saw three shadowy figures–Love, Ambition and Poetry. These figures appeared and reappeared. He could recognise them and intended to "follow them I burned / And ached for wings." They elicit a strong feel for life, for whirling back to life away from the prevailing mood of non-attachment. But this excitement is also kept in a low key because of its transience. He recognises

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the transience of love : "O follt ! what is love and where is it ?" Ambition is transitory too. What is sustaining is poetry. The poet soon realizes that it is unaided by joy :

"The last whom I love more, the more of blame
Is heaped upon her, maiden most unmeek –
I knew to be my demon Poesy."

What a paradox : He loves Poesy more but calls it his "demon." The poet who in his Nightingale ode intended to transport himself to the world of Nightingale by wearing wings of Poesy, she fully realizes its limits and hence he humbly admits :

"For Poesy : no – she has not a joy,
At least for me."

Wings of Poesy cannot bring joy for the poet as it has its limitations. So the poet, realizing the futility of ambition, love and poetry, cherishes a wish for a timeless existence :

"O, for an age so shelter'd from annoy,
That I may never know how change the moons,
Or hear the voice of busy common sense :"

The poet bids farewell to the shadowy figures for he has his visions :

"Farewell : I yet have visions for the night
And for the day faint visions there in store,
Vanish ye phantoms : From my idle spright
Into the clouds, and never more return :"

Keats deliberates upon adhering to mysteries and uncertainties and for such impassioned adherence, he could become a man of achievement in literature like Shakespeare.

In "Ode to Autumn," imagination makes Keats view things as they are. This poem has been variously interpreted to show Keats's excellence in achieving objectivity. The season with all its naturalistic manifestations is brought to focus. At the same time, in the second stanza, the poet personifies the season as a deity who envisions and excites the generative urge of the universe. In other words, it is the vitality of fruitfulnes that presupposes a new beginning or a change that has been celebrated. Autumn has been seen both as an independent moment or season and as an inseparable part of the cycle of seasons. The last stanza is significant in the sense that it brings in the resolution to the moment–time cycle dichotomy by sharp juxtaposition of the images of spring and autumn, of the past and the present :

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"Where are the songs of Spring ? Ay, where are they ?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,"–

Certainly a great change has crept into the poet's attitude to life. There is no sign of escape into the bower of the past, but there is an assertion of the willingness to accept the reality of autumn, to adhere to the things as they are, without relapsing into a sentimental longing for the past. In an early poem "Four Seasons" which Keats wrote with echoes of his master's voice, one discovers how the poet compares different phases of human life to four seasons. The poem forces us to believe that man and nature are inseparable for they share many things in common :

"Four seasons fill the measure of the year;
There are four seasons in the mind of man."

Man experiences "lusty spring" followed by summer when he ruminates over the "honied curd of youthful thought," and in this season, he is nearer to heaven. He presents autumn :

"Quiet coves
His soul has in its Autum, when his wings
He furleth close; contented so to look
On mists in idleness – to let fair things
Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook."

Thus it is evident that Keats treated autumn as a season of 'mists' and 'idleness' – a season in which fair things pass by unheeded. But in "Ode to Autumn" the poet anchors in a changed attitude. For him ripeness is not all. It is a prelude to the new beginning. It is not a season without "fair things." Nor is its "fair things" go unnoticed :

"Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river swallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourne;
The red-breast whistles from a garden croft
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies."

If in "Four Seasons" Keats introduced an autumn which was a season of idleness and inaction, in the ode, he deliberates upon action and verve which symbolise the unending cycle of life. The line with which the ode gets concluded – "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies"– is an assertion of activities of life and reiteration of the action that has already been depicted in the second stanza. Thus to my mind, even if the poem successfully achieves objectivity and negative capability, it is at the same time a mediation on life

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whose "swallows twitter in the skies."

Keats indirectly attempts to show the changing roles of imagination in the odes, but at the same time he seems to suggest that imagination has to mould reality, interpret reality but not to escape from it, for "He has his winter too of pale misfeature." Dickstein rightly observes with regard to "Autumn":

> That is no more than a flawless
> and seemingly effortless footnote
> to the odes of April and May. (Dickstein 262)

Conclusion :

Keats in his odes seems to have achieved three things. Firstly, he could define limits of imagination in relation to life. Secondly, he could design an acceptable equation between nature and life, the one reflecting and interpreting the other. And thirdly, he could assert a return to life and all that perpetuates life, rather than discovering in the imagination an instrument of escape. The poet's maturer vision in the odes enables him to accept the fever, the fret, the disease and the death with equanimity and ease, simply because of his frenzied realization that an escape from these diverse facets of life remains an impossibility. His fantasy of escape is transformed into an impassioned involvement with life grounded in the dialectical nature of imagination which allows him to accept life in its totality. And precisely because of this imagination, he admits in his poem on Lear :

> "Adieu ! for once again the fierce dispute
> betwixt damnation and impassioned clay
> Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
> The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit."

I'm at once remineded of what Jayanta Mahapatra, one of India's most anglophone poets, suggested :

> "For at the core of all good poetry is the enlargement of our awareness of life, when good poetry acts as a mantra, irrespective of whether one looks at it through Western or Indian eyes." (Mahapatra 288)

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5. *The Romantic Poets* (London, 1960) 172.
6. John Keats (Cambridge, Massachussets : Harvard U Press 1963) 486.

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A Fictional Perspective on Keats

Amitabha Sinha

I

This brief paper seeks an impression of Keats through s fictional perspective; to put it in simple language, to look at a fictional work and, at once, at the life and works of that poet. Now, from what will subsequently follow, it might appear that I was surreptitiously smuggling Keats novelistic, or, fictional, that is non-Keatsian, non-poetical into a seminar on a poet. Indeed so, in a sense; but I can't help that, since at least one novel has been written on Keats "today", that is, in the post-second War period; and if "today" is identified with the twentieth century, one long-short story also, in the nineteen-hundreds, which will make the fictional tally two. I shall, any way, be talking about the novel. This paper, therefore, is going to be some sort of a critical double speak, dealing with a novel, and, alongside, with a poet.

II

This implies a little bit of theorymongering; what is the nature of such a novel : a historical novel or a character-novel ? To my mind, it shares features of both, while, still, does not belong to any of these categories. For, Keats, for that matter Milton, or whoever, the major character in such a novel, is and yet is *not*, a historical, creative writer, One's impression/response would, therefore, be two fold: of/to a fictional character and a historical person (who has been familiarized through literature). Such novels, to my knowledge, have not often been written, but when they are, they most certainly become worth a renewed waking up to the frontiers of fiction. More of that, however, later on.

III

The novel I shall be speaking on is by the late Anthony Burgess, one of the most prolifically successful novelists of the age following the Graham Greene milieu, who has written novels on Shakespeare, on Marlowe, and at least one long-short story on French symbolists and Browning ; this novel is *ABBA ABBA*[1] the scheme of the Italian sonnet, octave. It deals with about the last two years of Keats's life in Rome (1820-1821; but that has to be inferred from the text till about the last chapter), and is split into parts One and Two, the first consisting of 10 chapters, and the other just one single chapter with a number of sonnets at the tail end. It is *One* which draws the major attention, although *Two* is cerainly not superfluous.

IV

The narrative opens with the fictionalized Keats playing with language (e.g., "mockery" is "mawkery"[2]) in his talks with his friends and Clarke, his doctor mostly on his illness, women, his poetry, and the art of poetry, and these are mostly authentic.[3] The novel develops through his fumbling, groping for

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the perfect sort of poetic articulation, at times in intense conversations with [guisseppe] Belli the Italian sonneteer; this groping grows to arrive at its ideal in the Petrarchan octave, along with which his illness grows; and, in chapter ten, he is dead (82-83).

This mixture of the fictive Keats and the historical Keats is a clever way of illustrating his poetic outlook on life, including the linking up of the two passions he is famous for : the love of pure art and the love for the well-known Fanny Brawne. The significant feature of this portrayal is that neither the narrative poems nor the famous odes nor dramas[4] (though not major attempts) but the sonnet is made the ideal aim of this search for self-fulfilment. One does not have to agree with this, but this fits the Keats-paradigm of the text. For, the ABBA ABBA pattern is here not literal but the representative-metaphor of the sonnet[5] which itself is made to be the metaphor of life, love, death, all bunched together as the ideal sense of life discerned by Keats, and at the same time, by the novel. Some lines may be helpful. For example, Belli is made to say, ". . . one *perfect* Sonnet . . . an *octave ABBA ABBA* and a sestet . . . the wordless sonnet also . . . yet speaks. It says . . . In my *eight lines* X in my six lines Y . . . the ultimate statement whose meaning is itself. What is this . . . but the true image of God ?" (68-69; my italics)

Keats, who is otherwise sharply contrasted with Belli, comes to nearly the same conclusion; he thinks, ". . . *ABBA ABBA* . . . Petrarchan sonnet *octave* . . . might *subsist above language* . . ." (81-82; my italics). These are obviously plausible ideas, whereby the sonnet and the octave become tropes, as it were, of life. Moreover, one is reminded, by the text, of the fact that he wrote, among others, on Fanny Brawne, too (71) the sonnet called "Keats's Last Sonnet",[6] for instance ("Bright Star"), which blends the two aforesaid two passions of Keats, art and Fanny Brawne. Beyond such longings, the fictional Keats could not live, and neither perhaps the historical poet.

V

Two, the second part is somewhat like a coda, opening, "so John Keats died on February 23, 1821, and Napoleon died a little over two months later (86), giving historical dimension to the narrative. What is intriguing in it is the introduction of an imagined modern poet, J. J. Wilson who also is rather fond of the sonnet and translates some of Belli's sonnets (at the ending of the novel), and who dies young in New York City. To one familiar with Burgess's novels, this is Burgess in disguise (the actual name is John Anthony Burgess Wilson), with differences, also, with the said Wilson. What is significant in the narrative of *Two* is that the narrator imperceptibly, inaudibly, asks, ". . . *he* Wilson *died prematurely* (but what, *when we think of Keats, can this be made to mean* ?) . . ." (91; my italics). Obviously, this means an analogy of the two; the laying down of the synchronic axis between the nineteenth and the twentieth-century poetic sensibilities, of which the sonnet-octave is made to be the symbol.

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VI

Indeed, *what can this be made to mean*, this novel, that is ? There need not be meaning in all this, still, a novel like this perhaps shows the immensity of the range fiction is capable of. Fiction sprawls when written in prose, and can, therefore, freely indulge in the interpretation of a creative writer and his writings. And, because it is inventive, it can ignore, if it so likes, the actuality of the interpreted. By doing these, this novel opens a hermeneutic window on Keats in the shape of the sonnet. One need not be persuaded into accepting that ; whether to follow it up or otherwise is the business of the Keats-scholar. Meanwhile, this novel functions like yet another portrait of an artist as a young man, a moderately well-drafted medium introducing Keats in a new, fresh light.

Notes and references

1. Anthony Burgess, *ABBA ABBA* (London: Faber & Faber; 1977); page-references to the text are to this edition. Incidentally, the long-short story I mentioned is Rudyard Kipling's 1902 tale, "Wireless".
2. One notes that Keats wrote "mawkish" in the Preface to the *Endymion*.
3. See, e.g., *The Letters of Keats*, ed., Robert Gittings (OUP paperback, 1992), 398-99, which include allusion to Keats's fondness for punning.
4. Not *Lamia*, nor St. Agnes, nor, say, *otho the Great;* strange, fascinating.
5. Keats wrote both kinds of the sonnet, Shakespearean and Petrarchan; this novel presents his concern with just the Petrarchan.
6. This sonnet is Shakespearean, and yet an instance of the sonnet-metaphor of the text, if I am not over interpreting idea of this poem.

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Discovering the Composite Self: An Essay On John Keats

Tapati Gupta

"I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death", John Keats confidently asserted in a letter of October 14 or 15, 1818. Bicentenary thoughts on Keats invevitably includes regret at his missed opportunities. A poetic career that spanned just four brief years; a personality that was still in the throes of self development. An intellect that had the makings of a great critic:" praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic of his own works", he said of himself. He had the objectivity not only to obliterate himself in a creative empathy with his surroundings, (the Negative Capability he so praised in Shakespeare), but also to judge for himself the quality of his own work. This is evident in the preface to *ENDYMION*, a work that engaged him for a great part of his brief creative life and was so cruelly and unjustly referred to as "drivelling idiocy" by 'z' in *BLACKWOOD'S EDINBURGH MAGAZINE*, Vol III no. XVII, August 1818. As it later transpired the anonymous critic was John Gibson Lockhart, Keats wrote in the preface to *ENDYMION* :

> "The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life in between in which the soul is in a ferment the character undecided, the way of life uncertain . . . thence proceeds mawkishness . . ."

Keats was a romantic with a staunch belief in the ethical value of Beauty and Imagination; "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination"[1] in spite of its acknowledged immaturity, Keats valued *ENDYMION* because of what he had learned in the process of writing it, the experience gained and the critical faculty awakened. Its pulpy texture in which idea became diluted in over-sensuous prettinesss does not cancel its contribution to English poetry. Aileen ward refers to the fact that Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* rightly pointed out that Keats was among the first to discover the possibility of a human meaning in old myths.[2] Shelley expressed his ardent admiration for Keats's talent although in spite of sincere efforts he could not go through the whole of *ENDYMION*.

HYPERION, that unfinished magnum opus that has been described as a poem on progress, Kenneth Muir thinks that Keats's desire for an England in which the progress that was interrupted by the Tory reaction after the French Revolution would be resumed and accelerated in reflected is the poem.[3] Though Keats was not uninterested in politics and had even nurtured journalistic programmes, he seldom let politics enter his poetry. In *HYPERION* he devises a mythology of his own and invests it with an idea the weight of which punctures the fable and reveals its weak structure. He abandoned it perhaps because he felt himself yet unprepared to accept its challenge. The progress

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extolled by Keats, in keeping with eternal law –" That first in beauty should be first in might." — The poem contains memorable romantic lines : "Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty's self;" this awareness of the beauty in sorrow connects with Keats's apprehension of tragic reality and tragic beauty; it crystallizes in his famous appreciation of Shakespearean tragedy, especially *KING LEAR*.

Throughout his life of twenty-five years Keats struck a balance between the positive and the negative, the world of imagination and the world of circumstances. He was keenly aware of the responsibiities of an elder brother to brothers and sister orphaned at an early age; he even instructed his fiancee to keep in touch with his sister Fanny during his absence. His letters show his love for his friends, his dedication to intellectual and professional pursuits, his commitment to poetry. His relationship with Fanny Brawne became an agonized struggle for self-realization. It culminated in an equation of love and death: he longed to possess both at the same moment. Life was for him a vale of soul-making", the poet, a self-negating personality.

"I lay awake last night listening to the Rain with a sense of being drowned and rotted like a grain of wheat."[4]— Like Shakespeare he sought to *become* what he created, merging himself with creatures and effects of his creation. In spite of what critics say about the perfection of the six great odes, *PSYCHE, MELANCHOLY, NIGHTINGALE, GRECIAN URN, INDOLENCE* and *AUTUMN*, lyric poetry, mere subjectivism, was not the conscious aim of his poetic activities, for Keats himself regarded them as incidental work, as E.C. Pettet has obsrved.[5]

Keats's career was a journey towards a goal. Arrival was prevented not by death alone, but also by an inherent urge for continuous self evolution, self-fulfilment; horizons were ever receding, ever-expending. It was better so. Wordsworth's "Genius" explored those dark "passages" of "life's Mansion", mysterious, intricate; "now if we live and go on thinking we too shall explore them," Keats asserted. It is interesting to speculate on this bicentenary of his birth, where the exploration could have led.

In the Induction to *THE FALL OF HYPERION* Keats affirms his faith in poetry as the mode of his own spiritual development. The revised *HYPERION* is the revolutionary claim that the poet creates in order to self-create. And in *ODE TO INDOLENCE* he says,

> A rosy sanctuary will I dress
> With the wreathed trellis of a working brain.

Although Keats believed that Poetry should come "naturally as leaves to a tree," he never under-rated the value of intellect and knowledge in the making of a poet. In a letter to his brothers, George and Tom he writes, "Nothing is finer for the purposes of great production than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers. (Jan. 23, 1818).

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Keats was conscious of the replenishing power of all knowledge. In May 1818 he realized he could take up his medical studies again without any disruption in poetic pursuits; "Every department of Knowledge we see excellent and calculated towards a great whole — I am so convinced of this that I am glad at not having given away my medical Books, which I shall again look over to keep alive the little I know thitherwards," Deprived of a literary education, he did his best to enrich his mind by the converse of teachers, friends and mentors like Charles Cowden Clarke, Leigh Hunt, Benjamin Robert Haydon, Charles Armitage Brown, Charles Wentworth Dilke, Benjamin Hamilton Reynolds, Benjamin Bailey, Hazlitt, Wordsworth, Lamb, Shelley.

His desire to visit Italy never was fulfilled, except when he went to live in Rome" a posthumous life" and found burial in the Protestant Cemetery there near the Pyramid of Cestius. Yet he strove to learn Italian and Latin in order to become better acquainted with the work of Ariosto, Dante, Artino, Sannazaro and Machiavelli. Among English poets he fed on Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton. His own poetic style shows a steady development.

John Keats declared himself a votary of the life of 'Sensation' as opposed to 'Thought' yet was supremely wary of mere sensation, shallow and frothy:

> An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people — . . . The difference of high sensations with or without knowledge appears to me thus: in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again, without wings and with all the horror of a bare-shouldered creature — in the former case, our shoulders are fledged, and we go through the same air and space without fear . . .

To Keats knowledge became a sensation and sensation an idea. He applied himself to life and experience with a 'gusto' (a recurrent word in his letters). His walks on Hampstead Heath, the game of cricket he enjoyed playing on it, the glass of claret, his meeting with Coleridge, his affair with the mysterious and sophisticated Mrs Isabella Jones who had the words 'Je reviendrai' inscribed on her seal and all the varied fare his short life offered.

What is most important, his acquaintance with painting and sculpture, seems to have become one of the means towards the development of a composite creative personality. It was as though he was creating himself anew, sympathising with the sensations felt by artists working in other media. With an assured Romantic belief in the transcendent value of poetry it appears to this writer that Keats sought to embody in his poetry the values not only of painting and sculpture but Gothic architecture also. Consequently his work assumes plastic qualities rare in his contemporaries.

Keat's response to the plastic arts may be termed 'kinesthetic'. He re-creates in poetry an intense emotional–intellectual tryst with medieval interiors and sculptural forms. Even human drama is framed in sculpturesque relief and

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the reader is impelled along aisles and interiors of medieval and Corinthian palaces, whispering crypts of Gothic chapels, the mellow curvature of Greek sculpture. An extremely cultivated approach to the fine arts and one that indicates the poet's movement towards becoming what I have called a composite artistic personality, a step forward in his mission of progressive evolution.

Much of Keats's poetry exemplifies the principles of three-dimensional works of art which is achieved through evocation of simultaneous movement of mind and the senses. Thus the poet's response and reader's response become one, lending to the verse a dimension that goes beyond the limits of verbal appeal; the poetry becomes sculpture, it assumes architectural implications. I shall try to illustrate these remarks as far as possible within the limits of this article.

In sculpture tangibility of form becomes clear; our eyes tell us what our hands would like to know, it gives a visual feel of roundness, smoothness, ruggedness, etc. Keats's partiality towards tactile imagery is well-known. In the famous line "or on the wealth of globéd peonies", the cupped hands formulate the roundness that seems to transcend transience because the epithet 'globéd' makes the blossoms assume a sculpturesque solidity.

In *HYPERION* Bk. II the overthrown ancient gods, moved by anger, fear, anxiety, are viewed as huge impressionistic sculpture, taking on different dimensions and forms viewed from different angles and mood: "Above a sombre cliff/Their heads appeared, and up their stature grew/Till on the level height their steps found ease:/Then Thea spread abroad her trembling arms/ upon the precincts of this nest of pain." The lines are hauntingly otherworldly, like the Egyptian sculpture in the British Museum that Keats saw. More important is the visual movement the reader experiences, a sense of kinetic force building up and coming to rest as Thea spreads her arms. One remembers an early line, "'Tis might half slumb'ring on its own right arm." Keats shows an understanding of the centre of energy that constitutes the focal point in sculpture. The fossilized energy in equestrian statues, the stored energy in a marble discus about to be hurled. Keats achieves a remarkable artistic transformation. Poetry acquires the values of sculpture.

> Deep in shady sadness of a vale
> Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
> Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,
> Sat grey-haired Saturn, quiet as a stone,
> Still as the silence round about his lair;
> Forest on forest hung about his head
> Like cloud on cloud.
>
> HYPERION Bk I.

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Saturn here has the primitive grandeur of open air sculpture, almost a Druid simplicity — a memory of Stonehenge minus the forest ? — we watch with baited breath. The thickpiling of cloud and trees lends the form a vivid physical presence and environmental intergrity. Sculpture, unlike painting, depends on light from external sources. Here the lightless environs make everything more sombre. Again Thea and Saturn are so still and "postured motionless" that they appear "like natural sculpture in cathedral cavern"— the niche sculpture in medieval cathedrals that harmonizes so well with the architecture. There is moreover a deep awareness of the sublime grandeur of the natural setting. The reader is asked to activate both knowledge and imagination for a proper appreciation. In *HYPERION* Keats indicates the raison d'etre of sculptured and architectural shape. As Ruskin[6] among others was to point out later created form fellows the forms of nature. The monumentality of the images of *HYPERION* is achieved by this imaginative linking together of nature's forms with those created by the artist.

Keats was able to convey the essence of the plastic arts. He could not only 'intensify' his consciousness, but 'extensify' it, that is, enter into the consciousness of others, even inanimate objects. Richard Woodhouse reported how he could conceive a billiard ball to be soothed by a sense of its own smoothness — the rapidity of its motion. This kinesthetic perception enters his poetry to give it a depth of concreteness, an innuendo of the life that vibrates in the artist's creation of form.

His fascination with stillness and movement, so potent in *ODE ON A CRECIAN URN* and the *BRIGHT STAR* sonnet could be the outcome of his thoughts on 'energy' not only that displayed in a street fight but the more metaphysical energy coursing through nature and crystallising in the artist's creativity. A frequent gazer on the Elgin Marbles, he must have noticed the fascinating disposition of the drapery which animates the forms, revealing, rather than concealing, the body that lay underneath, and giving to form a kinetic energy lacking in the sedateness of the earlier archaic period in Greek sculpture. The Elgin Marbles belong to the High Classical period (c. 450-400 B.C.) The Barthenon frieze in spite of its thin surface makes one perceive the life beneath the skin. The contour lines do not act as borders but seem to have grown organically from the inside. Keats's imagery pulsates with a force not merely the result of magical words. It is a holistic engagement of the self with the expressive artistic form.

Some passages in Keats's poetry has the same appeal as relief sculpture, which depends for its effect on subtle gradations of light and shade depending on the direction of light and the angle of vision. It appears therefore more rigid than sculpture in the round. Many of Poussin's paintings have this relief-like quality with prominent delineation of form and strong disposition of light; only the surface is illuminated. Critics like Ian Jack and Sidney Colvin before him have found the possible visual sources of Keats's poetry. Ian Jack in *Keats and*

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the Mirror of Art traces much of Keats's poetry to Poussin's paintings, which the poet must have seen in print. The aim of this article is not to pinpoint such similarities but to suggest how aware Keats was of the affective qualities of the visual arts. Deeply moved by what he saw in the British Museum, in Leigh Hunt's collection of prints, in Stansted Chapel, in the Gothic cathedrals at Winchester and Chichester, the medievalism of Oxford, and by what he learned through discussions he had with Hunt, Severn, Haydon, Hazlitt and perhaps in the company of the painters William Hilton and Peter de Wint, Keats was inspired to employ poetic techniques that make readers constantly shift ground: from readers of poetry they often become viewers of sculpture and painting and are sometimes made to walk down deep naves and arcades of lavish interiors. What is more significant is his appreciation of sculpture and architecture as part of the wonder of the created universe. The poet's alignment with such forms is also a measure of his 'negative capability', his deep empathy with what the imagination seizes as beauty, his romantic idealization of art. Had he lived longer he would doubtless have become not only a maturer poet, but one with a highly developed aesthetic-cultural creed.

Most commentators make much of the visual, sensory, sensuous, sensual and synaesthetic aspects of Keats's imagery. But no one to my knowledge has discoursed at length on his sense of space. In relief sculpture the eye roams from point to point over space and the whole surface can also be taken in at once: the focus is uniform. An urn is turned round so that only a few points are visible at a time: "They passed, like figures on a marble urn, when shifted round to see the other side : They came again : as when the urn once more/ is shifted round, the first seen shades return." In some of the statuesque forms of *HYPERION* and other poems, the viewer is stationery, so are the forms: grave and dignified; the surrounding space lents the required dynamism. But in poems describing interiors, as in the brilliant *THE EVE OF ST' AGNES* and the fragment *THE EVE OF ST MARK* the reader spectator walks *through* "each arched porch, and entry low," and "along the chapel aisle by slow degrees;" "beside the portal doors,/Buttress'd from moonlight stands . . ." With *Hyperion* we move "From stately nave to nave, from vault to vault/Through bowers of fragrant and enwreathed light". And diamond-paved lustrous long arcades," until the "great main cupola is reached." Miltonic evocation of space is performed through kinesthetic means.

In *ST AGNES* Keats uses light even as Gothic sculpture and architects would. Chiaroscuro becomes a powerful expressive feature aiming at a mysterious obscurity with forms broken by shadow emerging from a dark background.

In *ODE ON A GRECIAN URN* and *CDE TO AUTUMN* the subtle coolness of touch, the placidity of movement, remind one of the serenity of some relief sculpture where the eye moves on a plane broken by subtly modulated elevation.

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The painterly qualities of Keats's poetry are too obvious and too complex to be adequately treated in so short a span. I therefore refrain from discussing this aspect of his art.

To conclude it should be pointed out that the emotive response of John Keats to life, art and culture would be fully appreciated if the reader is prepared to accept the frequent transformations of effect that Keats achieves. Poetry becomes sculpture, architecture, painting. It requires an alert and sophisticated sensibility to appreciate such experimentation possible only to a poet belonging to the 'Cockney School of Poetry' that pejorative term applied to Hunt and Keats by *BLACKWOOD'S EDINBURGH MAGAZINE*.

John Keats was inspired by the gifts of civilization, by the way man visualizes life not only in words but through visions in stone. Against the allegation that Keats was too absorbed in the senses, physicality, mere externality, and failed to reach the 'purer mind as did Wordsworth, one may assert that Keats made an unique attempt to be in empathy with the sensibility of artists working in different media, to point out the riches created by human mind deified . . . for, that is what artists really are.

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"The Budding Morrow"
A Reading of Keats's Great Odes

Visvanath Chatterjee

Aye, on the shores of darkness there is light,
And precipices show untrodden green;
There is a budding morrow in midnight.
Keats, 'To Homer'

I

The three celebrated odes of Keats, the '*Ode to a Nightingale*', the '*Ode on a Grecian Urn*', and '*To Autumn*', can be read as studies of the spiritual crisis and its resolution as experienced by the poet. They represent the three stages of Keats's spiritual development and can be described, by taking the cue from Dante, as Keats's onward Journey from Inferno —through Purgatorio— to Paradiso. The three well–known chapter–headings of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, 'The Everlasting No', 'Centre of Indifference', and 'The Everlasting Yea', are also relevant here. The '*Ode to a Nightingale*' is remarkable for its intensity but this intensity is completely of the negative kind. In other words, the attitude of the poet in this ode is anything but positive. It is a poem of 'despair' and this is emphasized by the use of the word in its plural form with the striking compound 'leaden–eyed' as its epithet. The vale of Soul–making here is also a vale of tears. There is no such poignant intensity in the '*Ode on a Grecian Urn*'. It seems to be written in a neutral style, with no 'fine excess' that characterizes the Nightingale Ode; a common greyness seems to silver everything. In '*To Autumn*' we have an intensity of a different variety. If the '*Ode to a Nightingale*' is a poem of unbelief, '*To Autumn*' is a poem of faith. The mood is one of acceptance — serenity instead of dejection, quietude instead of despair. The '*Ode to a Nightingale*' is a poem of death, '*To Autumn*' is a poem of life. There are eight stanzas in the '*Ode to a Nightingale*', five in the '*Ode on a Grecian Urn*', and only three in '*To Autumn*'. Brevity is the soul as much of faith as of wit and when the poet regains his faith in life and nature, he can express his acceptance in only thirtythree lines.

II

The Nightingale Ode is a spring ode (we know this from stanza 5) but this spring is that of Chitrangada in Tagore's song — a springtime full of tears. The '*Ode to Nightingale*' is a poem of profound sadness. It is full of what Virgil describes as *lacrimae rerum* and Matthew Arnold paraphrases as 'the sense of tears in mortal things'. It pervades the entire poem. 'Fled is that music:...', that is how it ends. Coleridge wrote '*Dejection: An Ode*'; Shelley wrote '*Stanzas Written in Dejection near Naples*'. The word 'dejection' was too often profaned for Keats to profane it. Otherwise he might as well use the word in the title of his Nightingale Ode. Is not dejection writ large on the poem ? The first

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six lines of the third stanza of Shelley's poem sum up the mental condition of Keats in this Ode:

> Alas ! I have nor hope nor health,
> Nor peace within nor calm around,
> Nor that content surpassing wealth
> The sage in meditation found,
> And walked with inward glory crowned–
> Nor fame, nor power, nor love, nor leisure.

But the line that follows, 'Others I see whom these surround', is not applicable to Keats's ode; for Keats seems to suggest that nobody is happy. (Even with his small Latin and less Greek, Keats might have been aware of the words of Solon quoted by Herodotus: 'Call no man happy till he dies.') The miseries that will not let the poet rest are not only his own miseries but also the miseries of the world. It is his own miseries that he finds everywhere. As a matter of fact, in this he shares the generalizing tendency of the Prince of Denmark. From his own experience of some evil people around him, Hamlet came to the conclusion that the world itself was a corrupt world:

> ...'tis an unweeded garden,
> That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely. (I.ii.135)

Hamlet is relevant here also because Keats's list of the woes of the world, given in the third stanza of the ode, is clearly reminiscent of Hamlet's catalogue of 'the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks/ That flesh is heir to' beginning with 'the oppressor's wrong' in the famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy (III.i.62). Hamlet's to grunt and sweat under a weary life' is transformed by Keats into the Wordsworthian 'the weariness, the fever, and the fret'. And the 'heart-ache' of Hamlet Keats introduces in the very first line of his ode; only he makes it more poignant by making it more personal: 'My heart-aches'.

For the moment, Keats is in a mood of bitter pessimism, and perhaps only Carlyle's phrase, 'the Everlasting No', can do full justice to it. The poet hardly admits even a momentary happiness. His happiness in line 6, 'but being too happy in thine happiness', is ambiguous, to say the least. In any case, the four opening lines hardly suggest that his happiness was of the normal sort. 'Aches', 'drowsy numbness', 'pains', 'hemlock', 'dull opiate', and 'Lethe-wards' are not usually associated with happiness. They may be more appropriately associated with what we normally describe as 'melancholy', not the unconventional 'Melancholy' on which Keats writes one of his odes. In fact, Keats, like Shelley, does not believe in any unalloyed joy whatsoever. All his joys are 'aching' joys and all his raptures are 'dizzy' raptures. To quote his own words from the '*Ode on Melancholy*': 'Ay, in the very temple of Delight/ Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine.'

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It is curious that Keats specifically mentions that he is not envious of the nightingale's 'happy lot'. That is exactly what he seems to be. He contrasts his own unhappiness with that of the bird's happiness a number of times, implicitly as well as explicitly, in the same way that he contrasts man's mortality with the bird's supposed immortality. Envy is the feeling naturally expected of him–not any mean ill feeling or disgusting discontent towards the bird but a kind of enlightened self-pity that makes Shakespeare's Orlando exclaim in *As You Like It*: 'But, O! how bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man's eyes.' (V.ii.48) The bird's happiness seems to be one of the reasons for Keats being 'at the height of heart-heaviness' (the words are, once again, Orlando's), and his feelings of guilt might have led him to deny the feeling of envy.

Stanza 6 of the poem may imply that the poet is happy because he enjoys the company of the nightingale but this happiness also is completely overcast by the idea of death which is personified in the very second line of the stanza. Byron, Shelley, and Keats often look upon death as 'a consummation devoutly to be wished' but surely this is morbid. The happiness associated with death is at best the culmination of an agony, while the happiness associated with living culminates in an ecstasy, that which is the portion of Keats's nightingale. Moreover, words such as 'darkling', 'die', 'requiem', and 'sod' are not in accord with any concept of happiness. 'Shadows numberless' of stanza 1, which suggested the dying day, come full circle in this stanza on which Death itself casts its deep shadow, but not before the poet suggesting the idea of burial in the expression 'deep-delved earth' in stanza 2.

In stanza 2 the poet wants to get rid of his unhappiness through the artificial stimulus of wine. He has to strain himself a great deal for this. No ordinary wine will serve his purpose. It has to be that special kind of wine which is redolent of the beauties of Nature : 'Tasting of Flora and the country green'. But what about human beauty? How can our poet, the apostle of Beauty, can do without it? He may suffer from Hamlet's complaint of what the Germans call *Weltschmerz*: 'Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither' (*Hamlet*, II. ii.329), but the woman is still there in his subconscious mind. She may not be a Cleopatra, but she is at least a Charmian or an Iras, and as sun-tanned. A lovely feminine form is silhouetted against the wine-red lines. She is there all the time participating in the dance, the theme of the Provencal song, and sunburnt: 'with Phoebus' amorous pinches black' (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I.v. 28).

We are allowed by Keats to know the dancer from the dance and see how her mouth enriches that smile her eyes began. The erotic overtones are explicit, beginning with 'blushful' and 'winking' and ending with the climactic 'purple-stained mouth', an obvious allusion to her coral lips aflame with passion. 'That I might drink' may not refer only to wine. 'Drink to me only with thine eyes', sings Ben Jonson in 'To Celia'. (He echoes a passage in Philostratus:

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'Drink to me with your eyes alone...And if you will, take the cup to your lips and fill it with kisses, and give it so to me...') Kalidasa's amorous hero, Dushyanta, refers to the 'drinking' of the woman's nether lip, 'the zone of the quintessential desire'. Naturally, for such love play, seclusion is necessary. The implied privacy of the home is but a step to a wider kind of seclusion :

> ...and leave the world unseen,
> And with thee fade away into the forest dim.

III

The speaker's world-weariness is written all over the next stanza of the poem. The key-word is 'weariness'. The mood finds perfect utterance in the words of Hamlet's soliloquy:

> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of the world. (I.ii.133)

Life is a weary journey for Keats. He has made it plain in an early sonnet (1817):

> Keen, fitful gusts are whisp'ring here and there
> Among the bushes half leafless, and dry;
> The stars look very cold about the sky,
> And I have many miles on foot to fare.

We can trace here the inspiration behind Robert Frost's well-known line: 'And miles to go before I sleep.' When Jibanananda Das imagined that he had been trudging along the path of life for one thousand years, he was echoing Keats as well as 'the weary, wayworn wanderer' of Poe's 'To Helen'.

The weariness is sounded in the very lines of stanza 3. They ' groan' under the burden of human suffering and throb with the heart-ache at the heart of things. The weight is all the more heavy with 'the burthen of the mystery'. What is the point of existence when 'youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies' while palsy-stricken old people somehow live on, when Cordelia, beautiful in mind, body, and soul, dies a wretched death in the prime of her life while her father Lear, who has one foot in the grave, is still bound upon life's wheel of fire? What indeed? Life seems to be hardly better than a tale told by an idiot. Keats's mood of the Everlasting No reaches its climax in this stanza. Man is a thinking animal but 'to think is to be full of sorrow/ And leaden-eyed despairs'. Pace Horace Walpole, the world is a tragedy to those that think.

Brief is life's hour and everything is transient. Beauty's eyes become increasingly dim and a pair of bewitching blue eyes is reduced to blankly staring sockets utterly incapable of sending out any fair speechless message. Nor does love fare better. It lasts no more than a day--'ephemeral' in the literal

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sense of the word. This is true of all human love, thinks Keats in his present state of mind. Men might have been deceivers ever, but is woman any better? Keats at the time was somewhat disenchanted with Fanny Brawne (one of the major reasons of his dejection), who might have appeared to him:

> flippant, vain,
> Inconstant, childish, proud, and full of fancies.
> ('Woman! when I behold thee')

This reminds us once again of Hamlet, whose misogyny was much stronger and who found frailty and femininity synonymous. Somehow I cannot help thinking of the young Danish prince whenever I think of the young, English poet: they are kindred spirits and both of them died young, inheritors of unfulfilled renown. Perhaps Shakespeare revealed himself most intimately in Hamlet and Keats is the most Shakespearian of English poets. 'He is, he is with Shakespeare.'

Human suffering has teased the poet out of thought. Wine has been no real help as an oblivion-producing anodyne. After all, Bacchus is the god of revelry and one cannot serve both the Muse and Bacchus. A lover of beauty as he is, Keats can have nothing but contempt for Bacchus and his fierce Maenads and fiercer leopards. On second thoughts, he is a sadder and wiser man and his disillusionment is revealed in the impatience inherent in the repeated exclamation of 'Away!' Although he is utterly perplexed, he chooses poetry as his medium and vehicle. It is the right decision. As the Indian scripture tells us, it is better to die kin one's own profession because that of another is fraught with danger. What if the wings of the poetic vehicle are 'viewless'? (The Homeric expression for the diction of poetry is *epea pteroenta*, winged words.) He need not be afraid because the heart is a surer guide than the head and he can safely give himself up to poetic imagination. And in a trice, even before he has completed his sentence (at the end of line 34, there is a colon), he finds himself transported to the vicinity of the nightingale: 'already with thee!'. The retardation of the brain was no factor at all since all that the poet needed was not logic, but magic, the magic of poetry. It is the magic of poetry that transforms the poet's words into things of beauty: '...tender is the night, / And haply the Queeen-Moon is on her throne.' 'Haply' may recall 'Happily' but even if the speaker were happy for a moment, that happiness is dispelled by him at once: 'But here there is no light.' Dark, Dark, Dark, that has been the never-ending refrain. Glooms are always there, whether 'verdurous' or not.

IV

The tenderness of the night spills all over stanza 5 and the lines are suffused with the dark, fragrant moisture peculiar to a nocturnal forest-summarized to perfection in the words 'embalmed darkness'. (Such beautiful expressions abound in the Odes of Keats. No wonder, because he looked upon

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fine phrases with the eyes of a lover.) Two alliterative words, 'fast fading', used in connexion with violets, open an Iliad of woes.

The idea of death, implicit in 'embalmed darkness', is made explicit in stanza 6. The speaker's death-wish gets the better of his will to live. After life's fitful fever' (this Shakespearian expression has been echoed in stanza 3), death would be 'easeful' indeed. Death has always been Keats's magnificent obsession. In a letter dated 25 July 1819, Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne: 'I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute.' Keats thought of the 'possession of them both' also in his 'Bright Star' sonnet (written on a blank page of Shakespeare's Poems).

Stanza 6 is notable for the dawning of the poet's self-knowledge. He is face to face with the fact that his earlier attitude to death was something of a pose and he had been only 'half in love' with Death. His earlier poems on death were literary exercises rather than the unlocking of his heart: 'many a mused rhyme' (the artificiality of the phrase is tell-tale). But it is different now: 'Now more than ever seems it rich to die.' The simple yet unusual expression, 'rich to die', bespeaks the sincerity of the poet. For once at least he sincerely desires that the ever-revolving wheels of his weary life should at last stand still.

The nightingale is a soul in bliss because it was not born for death: 'immortal Bird!' But this is not logical at all, for if a bird can be immortal, so is a bard. However, it is bad reasoning but good poetry. Keats wants to mend matters by capitalizing the *b* of the 'bird'. He speaks eloquently of the 'immortal longings' of the nightingale: the great tradition of timelessness of which it is the inheritor. Men and women, whether in the days of the old Testament or in the Middle Ages or in any other age, ancient or modern, come and go, appear and vanish, but the Bird stays on: the immortal witness to human mortality, the perennial spectator of mundane transience. Desperately looking for some kind of permanence in the world of mutability and flux, Keats finds it in the music of the nightingale. Even then, his unhappiness he can hardly conceal. It wells up in phrases like 'this passing night', 'sad heart', 'sick for home', 'stood in tears', 'alien corn', 'perilous seas', and 'faery lands forlorn'. A superbly beautiful stanza, quintessentially romantic, but it is, at the same time, infinitely sad.

'Forlorn' is the last word of the penultimate stanza and it is repeated at the beginning of the final stanza. The repetition has an incantatory effect, no doubt, but more than that it suggests endless weariness. The refrain of Tennyson's 'Mariana' may help us to realize this mood: 'I am aweary, aweary,/ I would that I were dead!' 'I would that I were dead!' but that is not to be. The poet has to absent himself from the 'felicity' of death for the time being at least. He has been luxuriating in the imagination too long. Now he is brought back to the real world of living with a jolt. But the suggestions of death are as striking here as in the other stanzas of the poem: 'toll' ('Ask not for whom the bell tolls'),

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'adieu' ('adieu forever more'), 'plaintive anthem', 'buried', 'fled'. In fact, life and death can hardly be separated: they run into each other. In a special sense, in the midst of life we are in death. It is life-in-death as well as death-in-life. 'Living and partly living.' The poet is not sure whether he is more alive or more dead. He can only ask an unanswered question: 'Do I wake or sleep?' The first person singular is prominent in this interrogative sentence but the poet's doubt has a universality about it. He has been able to universalize a personal experience. Here, if anywhere at all in this ode, is the poet of Negative Capability.

V

Generally speaking, the Nightingale Ode is full of what Keats calls the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime. John Keats is very much there from the first line of the poem to the last. Although we are not bullied into any philosophy engendered in the whims of Keats, to use certain words from a letter that the poet wrote to his friend, John H. Reynolds, on 3 February 1818, the ode is patently a turning loose of emotion. Emotion, however, is held in check in the '*Ode on a Grecian Urn*'. It is only 'To Autumn' that can be described as an escape from emotion. In this ode Keats was no longer tormented with the feeling of being cribbed, cabined and confined 'in a sort of Purgatory blind' ('Epistle to J. H. Reynolds').

The despair of Keats gradually loses its intensity and, by the time he comes to compose the '*Ode on a Grecian Urn*', his growing indifference takes the edge off his discontent. He is longer obsessed with death but is yet to recover his will to live. It is this intermediate stage of which the '*Ode on a Grecian Urn*' is the product. The ode marks the 'Centre of Indifference'. For the complete recovery of the poet's faith–his faith in life and nature–we have to wait till 'To Autumn'.

The note of doubt on which the Nightingale Ode ended is, in a different way, continued in the '*Ode on a Grecian Urn*'. (Doubt itself is something indifferent–a middle stage between yes and no.) It can be traced in the two very important non-committal patterns of this ode. The first is a pattern of non-declarative grammatical structure and the second a pattern of paradoxical ambiguity. And all this is introduced in the very first stanza, in which there are as many as seven interrogation marks in the last four lines.

Death has not ceased to haunt the poet. He chooses for his subject an 'urn' and an urn has always its funeral associations. But death has lost much of its spell for the poet and he has deliberately distanced it by choosing an urn of ancient times. Moreover, as this ode is much less subjective, the poet is concentrating on an object and he tries to be detached. He is gradually progressing towards his own ideal of the chameleon poet of no identity.

It is not before the fifth line that Keats referred to the nightingale in the earlier ode. In the '*Ode on a Grecian Urn*' he directly addresses the urn in the very first word of the poem. There is not a single use of 'I', 'me', 'myself', or 'mine' in this ode. 'Our' has been used only once in the first stanza, and 'us'

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and 'ours' only once in the last. In the Nightingale Ode, on the contrary, there is 'I' in all the stanzas of the poem with the exception of stanza 3. 'I' begins stanza 5, and there are three 'I's in stanza 6. 'My' is used as the first word of the first two lines in stanza 1 and twice in subsequent stanzas. 'Me' is used in the last stanza. As can be expected, there is not a single use of the pronouns of the first person, singular or plural, in 'To Autumn'. As Keats progresses in his journey from darkness to light, from the Slough of Despond towards the Delectable Mountains, he starts shedding his ego (also in the literal sense of 'I').

The Urn that Keats addresses in his ode may have its origin in a marble that belonged to Lord Holland, but it is also something more. For all we know, Keats is also drawing upon his experience of the famous Elgin marbles and, in the process, makes the Urn a representative specimen of beautiful Hellenic sculpture. And it is even further universalized. But it is not without its uniqueness, because it is the 'still unravish'd bride of quietness', and, at the same time, the 'foster-child of silence and slow time'. Here is a paradox, and this paradox gives a rich ambiguity to the first two lines of the ode. (Paradox, as has already been noted, is pervasive in the poem.) The erotic element is there but only in a very subdued form.

VI

The poet seems to be a little unsure of himself and that is why uncertainty looms large in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. All the seven elliptical sentences in the last four lines of the first stanza are in the interrogative form. The stanza ends with the words 'wild ecstasy'. The calm and quietude of the opening is balanced by the sound and fury of the last line. There are a number of attempts to balance opposites in the rest of the poem as well.

The second stanza of the ode also begins with a paradox—only the paradox this time is more assertive and forthright: 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter.' The meaning is not very difficult to find out. The budding rose is more precious and enticing than the rose full-blown; the journey is more enjoyable than the destination. The imagined Yarrow is always lovelier than the real Yarrow. Moreover, as the spiritual level is higher than the sensuous, 'ditties of no tone' (they can be heard only by the mind's ear) are naturally of more value than the songs of human lips or music played on mechanical instruments. The songs and music, 'portrayed' on the Urn, are 'objects' of art, and hence they cease to be human and so are necessarily free from human limitations. Small wonder that they are sweeter. The trees on the Urn are also better trees as they will never shed their leaves. The sculptured lover may not embrace his beloved but he is fortunate enough to love beyond tomorrow, to be forever in love, without knowing love's satiety, which is not possible for an earthly lover. Similarly, unlike earthly beauty, the beauty of his beloved will keep its lustre forever. 'Her [Nature's] world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden,' writes Sir Philip Sidney in *An Apology for Poetry*. What is true of the poet is certainly true of other artists as well (the painter and the sculptor, for instance).

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The happiness and the permanence that the poet misses in real life he finds enshrined in art. He seems to have found them also in the melody of the nightingale, but it does not last ('Fled is that music'). This time he is on surer ground and hapiness abounds and abides. We have 'happy, happy boughs' in line 21, 'happy melodist' in line 23 and 'more happy love', 'more happy, happy love' in line 25. This growing happiness, however, comes to an abrupt halt when it is placed against the human situation: 'That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,/ A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.' The participal forms of the two adjectives suggest the continuous nature of human suffering. Sorrows crown of sorrow is to be found in these two tragic lines. All of a sudden we hark back to the Nightingale Ode.

Sepaking generally, the Nightingale Ode is marked by volubility, the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is marked by frugality (this frugality will reach its zenith in 'To Autumn') In a sense, the Nightingale Ode is heard, the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is overheard. Nowhere is this found to greater advantage than in the last three lines of stanza 4:

> And, little town, thy streets for evermore
> Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
> Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

The subdued tone of the ode has been set by the two opening lines, with 'still', 'quietness', 'silence', and 'slow time'. Then we have 'peaceful', 'silent', and 'desolate' in stanza 4 and 'silent' again in the last stanza. The voice of sculpture is the voice of silence; this may sound less paradoxical to those who have read Andre Malraux' beautiful book on art (the English translation by Stuart Gilbert is entitled *The Voices of Silence*). What is said is sweet, but that which is unsaid can be sweeter, and silence is sometimes more eloquent than words. And the effect of silence can sometimes be conveyed very powerfully through words, as, for instance, in the last three lines of the penultimate stanza quoted earlier.

VII

As in stanza 1 of the ode, so in stanza 4, uncertainty prevails. The poet has no idea about the identity of the people coming to sacrifice a heifer. The priest also seems to be an enigmatic figure. Nevertheless, the details of the Urn are verbally etched with great effect and it is a lovely scene. Once again, the poet fails to elicit any reply from the Urn and his questions remain unanswered. The poet asks and asks, but the Urn smiles and is still, 'out-topping knowledge'. To this extent, the Urn is free.

But not only the Urn. Time itself seems to be free. 'Slow time' of the first stanza is transformed into the free time of the last stanza, and the Urn is closely akin to this enfranchised time. Time, when free, is identical with eternity. And this is what Keats has to say about the Urn when he comes to the end of the poem:

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Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man..

The nightingale also was 'a friend to man', catering equally to kings and clowns. It was a source of solace to Ruth, when she was in the midst of her 'woe'. But the apparent permanece of the nightingale did not strike the right note in the conclusion of the Nightingale Ode. The poet appeared to be shaky at the end. He feels safer with the Urn. Everything else might be uncertain but the poet is at least certain of the permanence of the Urn.

As for the permanence of its message ('Beauty is truth, truth beauty'), that is another matter. It is not even original and can be traced to the opening stanza of George Herbert's gem of a poem, 'Jordan' (I): 'who says that fictions only and false hair/ Become a verse? Is there in truth no beauty?' The comment of W. H. Auden in *The Dyer's Hand* (1962) is worth quoting in this connexion:

If asked who said 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty!' a great many readers would answer 'Keats'. But Keats said nothing of the sort. It is what he said the Grecian Urn said, his description and criticism of a certain kind of work or art, the kind from which the evils and problems of this life, the 'heart high sorrowful and cloyed', are deliberately excluded. The Urn, for example, depicts, among other beautiful sights, the citadel of a hill town; it does not depict warfare, the evil which makes the citadel necessary.

Aldous Huxley pointed out the limitations of Wordsworth's approach to Nature and wanted to send him to the tropics for a corrective to his biassed view. Auden, in a somewhat similar vein, points out the shortcomings of the one-sided message of the Grecian Urn. The sublunary evils are facts; they cannot be wished away.

Keats's first experience of evil was shocking in the extreme. In one of his letters he metaphorically described it as the entrance of darkness into the chamber of maiden-thought. This is not in accord with the Urn's neat and naive formula which equates beauty with truth. It is therefore more sensible to take the last two lines in their entirety as the utterance of the Urn. Apart from anything else, it would be out of character for the poet in his present mood of uncertainty and 'indifference' to make the emphatic assertion that the Urn's aesthetic formula gives us the whole truth about the matter. The Urn is in a much better position than the nightingale to give some light of hope to the poet in the midst of his encircling gloom, but this light is dark enough. The partial failure of the Urn is perhaps suggested by the sweeping generalization credited to it at the end of the ode. To generalize, Blake has cautioned us, is to make a fool of one self.

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VIII

Writing on Thomas Hardy, Bonamy Dobree says that great tragic writers say 'yea' to life. This assertion seems to be valid even if we omit the epithet 'tragic'. It is only when Keats writes 'To Autumn' that he gets fully rid of his emasculating despair (Krishna rebuked the dejected Arjuna for his *Klaivya* or unmanliness) and says 'yea' to life with full-throated ease. Accept, accept. Accept life as it is without grumbling over its condition. Acceptance is the be-all and end-all of living. Autumn is welcome even if it be the prelude to winter. Is autumn any the less lovely than other seasons? Its exquisite sights and sounds have a charm of their own–a placid charm. Now that the poet has regained his equanimity, nothing can disturb it. He finds it reflected in the calm beauties of nature. This calmness comes from maturity whether in human life or in nature.

The poet has outgrown his immaturity and what appeals to him most is the maturity that he finds everywhere in nature during autumn. Mellow, mature, ripe–these are the words that now come readily to his pen. 'Mellow' is introduced in the very first line when he hails autumn as the 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness'. 'Maturing' crops up in the next line. And 'ripeness' we encounter in the sixth line: 'And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core.' It is this mellowness that brings fruitfulness all around, the mellow fruitfulness that is the poet's frame of reference in the opening stanza. Ripe, ripe, ripe, ripe to the core. Little wonder that critics have thought of Edgar's words in Shakespeare's *King Lear* in their search of the most appropriate epigraph for this ode: 'Ripeness is all'. The choice is all the more happy as Keats has by now got over his 'ill thoughts' (*King Lear*, V. ii. 11; V. ii. 9) or, to quote his own expression used elsewhere, 'horrid moods' (Epistle to Reynolds').

Ripeness, and fecundity which goes with it. The creative process is in full play during autumn. The maleforce represented by the sun is united with the female force represented by the earth in a kind of *lila* or love play, Keats's verbal form for which is 'conspiring'. The products of the union are found everywhere–as much in the grapes and apples as in the gourd and hazel shells. What a sublime sexual metaphor for the ceaseless work of creation! If Ceres or mother-earth is the basis of Keats's conception of Autumn, then it is only natural that 'bosom' appears in line 2, followed by 'ripeness' (in 'Bright Star' Keats has used the epithet 'ripening') in line 6, 'swell' and 'plump' in line 7. There are other words and phrases in the stanza which also may have some veiled female or erotic associations. The 'warmth' of the 'warm days' pervades the entire stanza and it contrasts sharply with the 'coldness' emitted by 'Cold Pastoral' in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'.

And also plenitude. Everything is in abundance. To describe the autumnal bountifulness that Keats introduces in 'To Autumn', I am tempted to quote Shakespeare once again (this time the words of Cleopatra describing Antony):

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For his bounty,
There was no winter in 't; an autumn 'twas
That grew the more by reaping.
(V. ii. 86)

It is somewhat ironic that this boundless bounty of the most romantic of poets is found in the most classical of his odes.

The second stanza is remarkable for its series of four pictures typical of autumn. Once again the feminine form comes to the fore–but now more girlish than motherly. To a Bengali reader of Keats, the first picture–of a young girl sitting careless with her hair soft-lifted (what a beautiful compound!) by the wind–seems to come straight from the love-songs of Tagore. The exuberance of the first stanza is recollected in tranquillity in the second: '.. with patient look,/ Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.'

For tranquillity it is that ultimately emerges from 'To Autumn'. At long last Keats has reached his paradise. After the infernal stress and strain of the Nightingale Ode, in 'To Autumn' we find 'calm of mind, all passion spent'. I am reminded of Shakespeare once more. (He is simply ubiquitous. Escape him? Never.) The tranquillity of 'To Autumn' is the tranquillity that we find in the last plays of Shakespeare. The dominant feature of the plays of Shakespeare's final period is a rare serenity and it is this serenity that we experience in the deep autumnal tone of the maturest ode of the most Shakespearian of English poets.

[All the Keats verse quotations are from *The Poems of John Keats*,ed. E. de Selincourt (London, 1961).

All the Shakespeare quotations are from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. W. J. Craig (O. U. P., London, 1955)].

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'A Beaker full of the Warm South:' John Keats and 19th Century Bengali Poetry'

Surabhi Banerjee

I first entered the poetic world of Keats when I was in school. It was a sonnet - *'To One who has been long in City Pent'*. I emerged enchanted, absolutely metamorphosed by the sheer magic of his blissful Arcadia. It was a moment of epiphany - my initiation into the world of poetry. Like Keats, on his first reading of *Chapman's Homer*, I was overpowered by a feeling of unmingled ecstasy. Since then, like most Bengalis, I have not outgrown my passion for Keats.

Much later I came to comprehend Keats's theory of 'negative capability', his vision of the binaries of life and his apparently simple but complex idea of beauty. Still much later I came to discover the dialectics in Keats's poetics and the contraries in Keatsian romanticism that enrich the corpus of his poetry.

Keats was not born for death. There is no need to commemorate or resurrect a poet like him who is palpably alive over two centuries, within as well as beyond the academic arena and one who continues to be relevant for more than one reason, to any poet who aspires to be a true poet. Even the new-fangled poetic tradition draws upon the basic tenets of Keatsian aesthetics. He is one of those rare poets who constantly lend themselves to inexhaustible appraisals, fresh critical insights and new explorations.

'With the Bengalis, Keats still remains an obsession' - observed an eminent Bengali poet at the national seminar on 'Reading Keats Today' held at the Department of English, at our University. I concurred. My own experience as an academic impelled me to be with him. 'Whom do you want to research on?' - 'on Keats'; 'who is your favourite poet?' - 'It's Keats again.' 'Which poet would you choose to read even if he were not on the academic curriculum?' - 'of course, Keats.' 'As a matter of fact', continued the renowned modern Bengali poet, 'the Bengalis can never be weaned from the taste of Keats's poetry - he had a staggering impact on our predecessors and he confines to stir our poetic sensibility even today. We perpetually fall back upon 'the beaker full of the warm south' which Keats's poetry offers in rich profusion'.

The remark was a revelation. An apocalyptic revelation of the mesmerizing influence of Keats on Bengali poetry down the centuries.

II

I would like to begin my exploration of Keats vis-a-vis nineteenth century Bengali poetry with a quotation from Rabindranath Tagore. In his review of 'Western Influence in Bengali Literature', a book by Priyaranjan Sen, Rabindranath writes:

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> 'It is this power to assimilate cultural influences from outside which proves the creative vitality of Bengali literature. Originality in literature lies in its capacity to absorb the universal in all literatures and arts and give it a unique expression characteristic of its particular genius and traditions'.

I propose to say a few words on the contribution of Keats to Bengali poetry exclusively in this perspective. A cluster of parallels, echoes and reverberations may be an index to an impingement which is, at its best, extrinsic in nature. It is fallacious to take parallels and resemblances for evidence of indebtedness or influence. Intrinsic influence is assimilation. It percolates down the grains and is absorbed in the texture. Sometimes the seepage is recognizable, sometime it is not. And it is extremely difficult to affirm this impact without the necessary literary evidence. Instead of making pointless allusions to kindred phrases, motifs and images, I propose to pinpoint, within the limited scope of this paper, the distinct qualities of Keatsian poetry which were recognizably assimilated by the leading Bengali poets in the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth century opened the floodgates of English and European romanticism. Bengali poetry was inundated by the waves of English Romantic Revival. Subjectivism, lyricism effusion of sentiments and exuberance of emotions had already filtered into Bengali poetry two years before Rabindranath Tagore was born, when Michael Madhusudan Dutta began to write his 'Tilottama Sambhab Kavya'. Madhusudan Dutta, Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, Nabin Chandra Sen, Biharilal Chakrabarti – all Rabindranath's immediate predecessors were deeply swayed by the English romantics. Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth and Byron taught them lushness, sensuousness and fanciful imagination. In the forties Madhusudan was steeped in the romantics; he was impressed with the fervour of Keats's emotions but he was more enchanted by Byron and particularly drawn by the epic poets.

Biharilal Chakrabarti's '*Sangit Shatak*' (One Hundred Songs) and '*Sarada Mangal*' reveal positive impact of Keats. Song No. 20 and 34 have recognizable echoes of Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and '*Ode on Melancholy*'. About this time Keats read closely Burton's Summary of the theories of melancholy as propounded by ancient, medieval and Renaissance physicians, philosophers and poets. They tried to find out the causes, symptoms and cures of melancholy humour. '*The Anatomy of Melancholy*' furnished him with the details of his sombre imagery and the '*Ode on Melancholy* in particular shows traces of Burton's influence. *La Belle*, composed in April 1819, is in the same strain, and is another product of the subjective malady which afflicted Keats at that phase. While he was composing *Endymion*, Keats wrote to Haydon,

> "You tell me never to despair – I wish it was as easy for me to observe the saying – truth is I have a horrid Morbidity of Temperament which has shown itself at intervals – it is I have no doubt the greatest Enemy and stumbling block I have to fear – I may even say that it is likely to be the cause of my disappointment".
>
> (Letter to Haydon, 10-11 May, 1817)

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Biharilal's lyrics evince a sponge-like absorption of the Keatsian strains of languor and melancholy, the agony of unrequited love and the concept of an idealized romantic woman who is at once pensive and dejected.

Debendranath Sen, another major poet of the century was perhaps the only Bengali poet who thoroughly imbibed Keats's sensuousness into his own poetry. '*Nirjharini*' - a collection of lyrical poems, contains a poem called '*Kalpana*' which is a transparent adaptation of Keats's '*Ode to Fancy*'. '*Lucknow ala*' - a poem included in an anthology titled 'Ashokguccha' shows direct influence of Keats's '*The Eve of St. Agnes*', noted for its evocation of the sensuous and the palpable. But again, *The Eve of St. Agnes* is more than mere sensuousness. The poem apparently impresses the reader as a wonderful saga of love told in verse, a stunning galaxy of pictures, depicting the medieval times; a Gothic romantic tale woven with frills and frippery of medieval romanticism. At a close reading *The Eve of St. Agnes* appears as the first poem to reflect effectively Keats's ambivalent responses to women; it is a powerful projection of Keats's awareness of the pleasures, ambiguities and the perils latent in the concept of romantic love. Here is a poem in which Keats arrives at 'a mystic blending of mortality and immortality, chastity and passion, the moonlight of perfect form and the ruddiness of intense experience.

Dwijendralal Roy, a noted writer of the Bengali Renaissance was an avid reader of both Shelley and Keats but his conception of romantic love and the world of lyrical fantasy was largely moulded by Keats. The romantic euphoria of his 'Aryagatha' is distinctly reminiscent of Keats.

Rabindranath Tagore who dominated the literary scene of the day had already begun writing as a perfect paradigm of the harmonious absorption of the East and the West. With Rabindranath it was a natural assimilation. Among the Romantics, Keats, perhaps, comes closest to him. It may not be difficult to discover Keatsian analogues to this or that image, phrase or a motif in Rabindranath's poetry. There is a marked kinship in respect of their poetic slant and poetic perception. The sensuous opulence of Rabindranath's earlier verse suggests his affinities with Keats. His *Ebar Phirao More*, *Ases*, *Varsasesh*, should be read with the poet's comments on them in *Amar Dharma*, which again establish his kinship with Keatsian aesthetics. Besides, no English poem is referred to in his writings so many times and so varied contexts as the *Ode to a Nightingale*. Rabindranath was fascinated by this Ode. Even two years before his death he recalls the Ode and he makes fine use of an entire stanza in a poem called '*Paricay*' in *Sanai*. This Ode is positively a poem of despair, 'a plaintive anthem'. It is a poem of spring, a springtime that is suffused with the lacrimae rerum, the sense of tears in mortal tings'. The verbal texture of the ode wovenwith words like 'aches', 'drowsy numbness', 'pain', 'hemlock', 'dull-opiate', 'Lethewards', highlight the pervasive note of bitter pessimism and world-weariness. This spirit of languishing melancholy invaded nineteenth century Bengali poetry to a considerable extent.

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Rabindranath was also profoundly impressed by Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, as is evident from his own remarks in his essay titled *Sahityer Pathe*. He naturalizes the Keatsian concept of truth and beauty. Much like Keats, he pleads for the intuitive apprehension as opposed to rational knowledge of reality. What thus and thus only is apprehended in Truth and the pleasurable of such apprehension is Beauty. His idea of Beauty, is not merely aesthetician but a great human and spiritual idea. With Keats Beauty means not an externally existent, physical and sensuous entity. Nor does he mean what he himself calls in one of his letters "an exquisite sense of the luxurious: It is an act of the mind.

Rabindranath's 'Chabi O Gan' (Picture and Song) is an obvious emotional sojourn with Keats to the world of beauty; the initiation into the world of beauty, the intoxication of beauty - all recall Keats. Rabindranath was fairly explicit about his fascination for Keats. In a letter written in December 1895, he writes:

"Of all the English poets I know, I feel the strongest kinship with Keats. There may be greater poets, but there is no other poet like him who is close to one's heart. There is a pristine purity of true delight in his language - a perfect harmonization of art and feelings. Keats's writings radiate an animated glow, it comes out of the spontaneous depth of his joy - I am very much drawn by that".

Rabindranath was attracted by the 'fine excesses' of Keats's poetry. This letter may as well be compared to a few lines from Keats's letter to Taylor:

'.... The rise, the progress, the setting of imagery, should like the sun come natural to him - shine over him and set soberly all through in magnificence, leaving him in the luxury of twilight' (Letters). Rabindranath's *Citra*, is suffused with Keatsian sensuousness. Similarly his *Banabani* too has been likened with the Keatsian perception of Nature as a primitive source of inspiration.

Keats contributed to the technical aspect of Bengali poetry as well. Rabindranath was particularly indebted to Keats for a particular form of verse - the run-on and enjambed rhymed couplet, where sense and rhythm flow from line to line and the couplets read almost like blank verse. It was in vogue among the English poets of the early seventeenth century. During the Restoration and the 18th century the end-stopped and self-contained variety took over but it was revived in the early nineteenth by Leigh Hunt in *The Story of Rimini*. Keats cultivated it from his friend Hunt and magically transformed it in many poems, including the whole of *Endymion*. The supple movement of the run-on and enjambed heroic couplet appealed more to the romantics than the rectilinear movement of the neo-classical brand. In Bengali verse, the end-stopped self-contained rhymed couplet was in use for centuries. Rabindranath was the first poet to take his que from Keats and assimilate it in Bengali. There is a whole crop of poems written between 1890 and 1941 where Rabindranath uses this

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measure. The earliest examples occur in *Manasi* (1890) and as late as 1941 in his *Janmadine* we find the poet writing in run-on enjambed couplets with irregular line-lengths. The poems in *Arogya* and *Ses Lekha* exemplify an admirably supple, fluent and flexible rhythm.

Besides these technical aspects, Rabindranath also subscribed to the Keatsian view of the ideal character which 'has much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen, 'enjoys light and shade' and lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated.'

For the Bengali romantic poets Keats remained a poet of miraculous sensuous apprehension and magical expression. They admired Keats's poetry for its auditory and pictorial qualities and particularly for its abundant sensuousness. His poems were read as lyrics of the sensuousness, as exbodiments of the feelings of ennui, fatigue, physical languor; as luxurious excursions into a world of ideal nature and life.

It was Keats who infused the ardour of emotions and romantic anguish into 19th century Bengali poetry. Though the poets in the forties and fifties turned to the imagists, to Baudelaire, Pound and Eliot for their inspiration, but in a deeper sense, the severance between the romantic tradition and the modern poetic tradition had never been complete. Modern Bengali poetry manifests this unceasing process of assimilation of the romantic legacy.

As a matter of fact, what the nineteenth century romantics failed to perceive in Keats's poetry, makes Keats relevant in the context of a mutable literary-cultural ethos and makes him immortal. Keats stands apart from most of his contemporaries by virtue of his profound insight into the tragic aspect of life, its atrocity and mutability. He writes in his Epistle to Reynolds (25 March 1818):

> I saw
> Too far into the sea; where every maw
> The greater on the less feeds evermore:-
> But I saw too distinct into the core
> of an eternal fierce destruction .....
> The shark at savage prey - the hawk at pounce,
> The gentle Robin, like a pard or ounce,
> Ravening a worm.

This is the other facet of Keats's poetry which the Bengali romantics ignored. Life seemed to Keats 'a vale of Soul making' in the course of which, by enduring bravely, a man might achieve a true identity. He thus admits a kind of immortality. It is interesting to observe how Keats worked out a religious principle answering to his experiece of life and certainly not at odds with Christianity : He writes:

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I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive
- and yet I think I perceive it–that you may
judge the more clearly I will put it in the most
homely form possible–I will call the world a
school instituted for the purpose of teaching
little children to read. I will call the human
heart the hornbook used in that school–and
I will call the child able to read, the soul made
from that school and its hornbook. Do you not
see how necessary a World of pains and troubles
is to scool an intelligence and make it a soul ?

But though Keats was for the popular, progressive interest, he did not share the facile optimism of his liberal friends who were content to live off the intellectual capital of the eighteenth century enlightenment.

In fact, Keats was the first of the moderns among the romantics. Douglas Bush observes : 'Keats's Shakespearean or humanitarian ambitious, his critical and self-critical insights, his acute awareness of the conditions enveloping the modern poet, his struggle towards a vision that would comprehend all experience, joy and suffering, the natural and the ideal, the transient and the external - all this made him capable of greater poetry than he actually wrote, and makes him, more than his fellow romantics, our contemporary' (Douglas Bush, Keats and his Ideas, in English Romantic Poets : Modern Essays in Criticism, ed, M.H. Abrams, N.Y. 1960, p 339).

Except Rabindranath, the nineteenth century Bengali poets were interested more in the Keatsian poetic attributes than in his ideas. Because of his singular detachment from any particular set of assumptions about the world, it is difficult to discuss Keats in relation to the ideas and beliefs of his time. Like other poets, he was as much a prophet of things to come as an interpreter of his immediate milieu. He is best understood as the first modern man, the poet as 'seer'

Keats touches on the problems of human life which have concerned the philosopher and the moralist. He has the rare faculty of approaching a problem with the minimum of preconceived notions. He writes to Reynolds :

..."I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me. The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not *think* -- we remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of this thinking principle within us - we no sooner

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get into the second, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for even in delight :

.... the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and Oppression - whereby this Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darkened ..... all dark, all dark, all leading to dark passages -- we see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist'. (Letter to Reynolds, Sunday 3 May 1818).

No apology is necessary for this long extract. This unravels the layeredness of Keats' poetry, of which the first generation of modern Bengali poets was, consciously or unconsciously, oblivious. Keats's poetry is not mere 'a beaker full of the warm South', it is far more opulent and far more complex than that.

I conclude this prresentation with surmises. Surmises about the myriad lines of hypothetical development of Keats's poetry. Had Keats lived to a ripe old age, perhaps he would have written ' a new poetry' giving in substance and style some foretastes of what may be called archetypal modernism.

Early this year I had a conversation with Andrew Motion, a well-known British poet and biographer of Philip Larkin. At the moment he is engaged in writing a biography of Keats. Why yet another biography? The biographer answered : Keats's life has in fact meant something new to each generation that has reflected on it, for it was an extraordinary life, both in the intensity with which he lived it and in the unconscious eloquence with which he recorded it. And a twentieth century biographer strives to convey something of the inner drama of his creative life. But I feel that the mystery of Keats, to use Middleton Murrey's term, tends to remain elusive, almost beyond analysis in the end and fortunately so : for it is the compelling reason for us to continue reading Keats wild surmises.

12-9-2K